

ONCE UPON A CURSE SERIES

Cursed by Fur

A Little Red Riding Hood Retelling

D. C. Gomez



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*To the fabulous Ms. Lavana Coleman,
For believing in dreams,
even when nothing was being published.
Thank you for being my Brilliant Angel.*

Chapter One



The sleek black Nissan Z cruised to the back of the parking lot at the rear of Kings Park, in Wake Village. For late October, the weather was still warm, and Nikita blasted the AC in the car. She loved the car. It was one of the few frivolous purchases she was actually proud of. The park was scheduled to be off limits to the public after ten pm; she had plenty of time. It was a moonless night, with clouds blocking the stars. A perfect evening for a late-night picnic.

The Z's clock blinked nine twelve. She was early, but she was always early to everything, regardless of the situation. Glancing at the rear-view mirror, she applied another coat of mascara to her eyelashes, giving them extra length. With the gold eyeliner she wore, her blue eyes were magnetic. The blood-red lipstick made her milky-white skin look almost transparent. On nights like these she could have passed for a vampire. She was grateful her magic was strong enough to block their powers from affecting her. The last thing she wanted was to be addicted to blood on top of all her other vices.

Roars filled the night and Nikita rolled her eyes. She was not a motorcycle kind of girl, but for the night she would pretend to be one. Like she pretended to be on so many other occasions. The Harley pulled up next to the Z. The driver took off his helmet, letting brown locks flow in the soft wind. Nikita couldn't deny it. The man was delicious. Sexy green eyes, charming smile with perfect dimples, and muscles to make any model

jealous. The man had everything any woman could ever want. Too bad for him, he was also a werewolf.

Nikita grabbed the picnic basket from the passenger seat as she unlocked her car. The biker opened the door and extended his arm to help her out of the car.

"Of course he had to be a gentleman," Nikita told herself, controlling her emotions.

"Good evening, gorgeous," the biker said in a baritone voice that fit his rugged demeanor. Nikita got a good view of his fitted jeans and motorcycle jacket as she climbed out of her car.

"Good evening, Jason," Nikita replied. "How was the ride?"

Nikita pushed back the hood of her cape, letting the strawberry-blonde curls bounce around her face.

"It could have been better if only you were with me." He leaned down, pressing his lips into hers, devouring them.

For a third date, Jason moved faster than most. Nikita indulged in the kiss. Running her hand through his curls. His hands found their way towards her waist, pulling her closer. For a few long moments they lost themselves in the kiss. Nikita feared they wouldn't make it to the picnic area at the rate the kiss was progressing. Gently, she pulled away.

"I worked really hard on this meal," she told him, pulling on the basket.

"I'm sure it won't go to waste," he muttered in her ear.

Nikita handed him the basket and stepped away from her car. She was on a tight schedule, and these little games were only delaying the end.

"Oh wait," she said, rushing back to the car. "You almost made me forget the blanket."

"You don't want to sit on the grass?" he teased.

"With this skirt, are you kidding me?" Nikita twirled around, showing off the barely there miniskirt she was wearing.

She bent over and pulled the blanket out, giving her date a full view of her ass. Not that he needed any more encouragement. The bulge in his jeans was threatening to destroy those poor pants if she made him wait too long.

"Ready," she exclaimed.

"Are you going to be able walk in the grass with those heels?" He examined the four-inch candy-apple-red stilettos she was wearing.

"They go fabulous with this cape," she replied.

"I completely agree, but not sure how effective they are for walking."

“Do you have a better idea?”

Jason didn't reply. Instead, he picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder.

“What are you doing?” she wailed, trying to protect her face from slamming on his back.

“Making sure you and those sexy heels don't get hurt.” Jason marched down the grass. “Last thing we need is your breaking an ankle.”

“Aren't you a gentleman? But do you have to carry me like a sack of potatoes?”

Jason stopped and gently put Nikita back down. “Good point. Please hold this.”

He gave her the picnic basket. Glancing around, Nikita took it. Jason winked at her, and slowly bent in front of her.

“If you don't mind, my lovely lady, place your arm around my neck.”

Nikita giggled and did as she was told. He reached under her legs and picked her up. Facing her, he asked, “Better?”

“Much,” she replied, and kissed his lips. “This is a more dignified way to travel.”

“I'm glad you approve.” Jason marched towards the back of the park. “I was thinking about you all day.”

“Me, too.” Nikita smiled back.

“Is this okay?” Jason asked, fifty feet from the parking lot.

“Perfect.”

He placed her gently on the ground. Facing him, she looked minuscule, even though in her heels she was almost five feet ten inches. Jason was way over six feet.

Together they arranged the blanket on the grass, next to a tall pine. Nikita could see a few of the houses from their location, but none had a direct view toward them. As cautiously as possible, she sat on the blanket. Jason removed his jacket and dropped it. He had a Metallica t-shirt with cutoff sleeves that framed his abs like a second skin.

“*Does he shop at the Baby-Gap store?*” Nikita asked herself. “*Can that shirt be any tighter?*”

Before her face could betray her, she focused her attention on the basket. Jason sat next to her, running his fingers down her arm.

“Bourbon or beer?” Nikita asked, holding a bottle of Knob Creek and one of Shiner Bock.

“I knew you were my kind of woman.” Jason licked his lips. “Let’s do bourbon tonight. What else do you have in that little basket, my little red riding hood?”

Nikita lowered her face into the basket, then glanced up through a curtain of blonde curls. With a coy smile, she winked back at Jason.

“Let’s see.” She pulled out several items wrapped in aluminum foil. “I made us chicken salad sandwiches on croissants, extra fudge brownies, and even brought a cream cheese dip for the fruit.”

“I’m impressed.” Jason moved closer to the basket. “Cooking is not something most women do lately.”

“I’m a girl with many talents,” Nikita lied. She couldn’t cook her way out of a paper bag if her life depended on it. She did know some incredible chefs and took full advantage of their talents.

It didn’t take long for her to arrange the impromptu picnic on the blanket. After handing a sandwich to Jason, she busied herself with the drinks. Bourbon on the rocks should have taken ten seconds to put together, but she needed to have time to add the special sauce without being watched. She placed two crystal glasses on the blanket and filled them halfway up with the amber drink. While she was a tequila kind of girl, not everyone could handle a glass of it.

Ensuring Jason was distracted with his food, she dropped five drops of her special amber solution in one glass. The taste of the bourbon would mask any lingering flavor from the small vial. She pulled a couple of ice cubes from a freezer bag and dropped them in the drinks.

“How do you like it? Nikita asked, swirling the drinks around and placing one next to Jason.

“Very nice,” he said, in between chewing.

Nikita giggled and wiped a piece of croissant from his face. “Well, I’m glad I passed the cooking test.”

“There are too many places to eat in Texarkana to make cooking a requirement for anyone,” Jason replied.

“That’s a shame.” Nikita pouted. “I was hoping for extra points.”

“You absolutely get that.”

Placing the sandwich on the blanket, he leaned over and kissed her lips. Nikita bit his lower lip, but quickly pulled away.

“Cheers,” she told him, holding her glass towards him.

“Cheers,” he replied, reaching for his glass.

They clinked glasses and Nikita chugged the entire drink down.

“Okay then,” said Jason with an eyebrow raised. “Guess the lady can’t outdo me.” He followed suit and chugged his own drink.

Wasting no more time, Nikita crawled on his lap. Jason leaned his head back and stared deep into her eyes.

“Are you sure you want this?” he asked, running his hands over her thighs. “The big bad-wolf might eat you today.”

“Oh, he better,” she replied, untying the strings of her red cape.

Jason pulled the cape off, exposing her tube top to the night. With his full attention on her chest, Nikita slid the tank down over her perfect abs. The soft breeze hit her nipples, making them hard. Her breasts weren’t the only thing coming to attention. The bulge in Jason’s pants joined in as well. Jason’s eyes shifted slightly, giving a hint of his animal side. A shiver went down Nikita’s spine.

“Oh God, you are gorgeous,” whispered Jason, pulling her closer.

Nikita let him take control and held her breath as his mouth engulfed her nipple. He wasn’t rough, nor was he gentle. There was no rush in his actions as he sucked on her while his hands gripped her ass. Nikita wrapped her hands behind his head and squeezed her thighs over his. Glancing quickly at her watch, she took in the time. She had twenty-seven minutes before the poison took him.

“Time to move this along,” she told herself. “At this rate, this foreplay could take all night.”

Gently she pulled away, as his teeth scraped the tender flesh of her nipples.

“I thought you wanted me to eat you,” he teased.

“Absolutely, but how about I make us both a tad bit more comfortable?”

Keeping eye contact with the aroused man, she moved down his legs to work on his pants. With a practiced motion that didn’t involve her looking down, she undid his belt. Her fingers moved quickly for the fly, but she stopped. Nikita glared at the jeans.

“You have a button-down fly?” Her eyes were wide as she tapped her fingers on his pants. “Why?”

“I didn’t want you to think I was easy,” he teased. “Besides, I thought you were up for a challenge.”

Nikita shook her head and went to work. It took her longer than she expected to undo the four buttons on the man’s tight-ass jeans.

“Whoever came up with this crap should be shot,” Nikita mumbled, as she hoped her press on nails wouldn’t pop off with the effort.

“Oh, come on, it’s not that bad.” Jason laughed. “You almost have it.”

“You do realize this is not sexy,” Nikita informed him. “I have a barely there thong, and you have the equivalent of a male chastity belt. How is this fair?”

“I guarantee I’ll make it worth the trouble.” He ran his fingers down the base of her neck and up her hair, massaging all the way up.

“After all this work, it better be . . .”

Nikita never finished her sentence since Jason wasn’t wearing anything under the jeans. Fully erect, he was at least ten inches long and thick enough that she debated if her fingers could wrap around the whole thing.

“Impressed?” Jason teased with the confidence of a man who knew how good he looked naked.

“Not bad,” she replied and licked her lips.

Jason tried to bend over to kiss her, but Nikita pushed him back. Instead, she lowered her head and slowly licked down his shaft. It was Jason’s turn to shiver. He dropped his head back and took long, deep breaths, as Nikita licked up his shaft and indulged on his tip. A growl escaped his throat and Nikita noticed his hands shifting into claws as he held on to the blanket. She released him with a kiss and moved up his body. Reaching over his head, her breasts resting on his face, she pulled a small prescription bottle from her picnic basket.

“Ready to take it higher?” She wiggled the pills as she slid back down.

“What is that?”

“E. With your metabolism, this should enhance everything to a new level. At least, that’s what I was told.” She undid the bottle and took out two small, white pills.

“I don’t do drugs.”

“You are really not curious how it would feel under the influence in a park that we could get caught in?” She popped a pill in her mouth and swallowed. “I thought the big bad wolf wasn’t afraid of anything.”

Nikita wiggled on his lap, making the erection harder, if that was even possible. Jason could barely contain his breathing. He glanced around the park, then back at her.

“I hope I don’t regret this.” He opened his mouth, and she dropped the tablet on his tongue.

“It will be the experience of a lifetime, I promise.” She lifted his chin, ensuring he swallowed the pill.

Closing his eyes, he tilted his head back and swallowed. It would take less than five minutes for the drug to kick in. If she accelerated his heart rate enough, it could be as little as three. Nikita glanced at her watch. She had twenty-three minutes left.

“Time to get this done,” she told herself.

She adjusted herself on his lap and slowly slid down his shaft. Jason’s head popped up and locked eyes with Nikita. She winked back and bit her lip. Jason moaned as he struggled to take deep breaths. He dug his fingers into her thighs, as she increased her speed. His features slowly shifted as he lost control of himself. Nikita moaned, louder than was necessary, driving Jason higher. He rocked faster and faster.

“Oh God,” he screamed, and dropped unconscious to the ground.

Nikita opened her mouth, and from underneath her tongue, took out the small tablet. She checked her watch and shook her head.

“Are you serious? Six minutes? Why couldn’t you be like normal guys and just pass out at two?” She hopped off the comatose man and got to work. “By the way, you were right. You definitely should not do drugs.”

Cleanup normally took her ten minutes. This time she would need to make it work in seven. Not looking around, she crawled to her basket, dropped the pill inside and pulled out a pair of black plastic gloves, wet-wipes, and a trash bag. Experience had taught her to focus on the things that needed to get done, and to ignore the soon to be dead body in front of her.

She moved systematically through the scene, collecting all the food items she brought. The bottle of bourbon was wiped down and placed in Jason’s hand. Penis was also cleaned of any bodily fluid belonging to her and covered with the owner's other hand.

“Drunk boy jerking off in a park, it could happen,” Nikita remarked to herself as she analyzed her staged scene.

She took off her heels and pulled a pair of sketchers from the picnic basket. Shoes on, cape secured back on her head, she carefully stood. With all items removed and stored in the basket, she left the body on the blanket. If her calculations were correct, his heart would stop in exactly twelve minutes. Running into Death while he transitioned to the other side would be a sure way for the Reapers crew to find her. Something she was planning to avoid at all costs.

“He was kind of cute, for a were,” Nikita said as she reached the Z. “Too bad they all must die.”

She had developed the horrible habit of enjoying the attention she received during the dates. Being in control of the situation turned her on more than the act of sex. She wanted vengeance against the entire race but playing with them enticed her.

How can I loathe something so much and yet be so attracted at the same time? she asked herself. But she didn’t have time for any inner turmoil at this point in her life.

Without another glance towards the crime scene, she climbed in her car. She dropped the basket in the passenger seat and left the park.

Chapter Two



Bob took a sip of his coffee before stepping out of his truck. It was not a good sign when he got a call from the local police at eleven thirty at night on a Saturday. Especially so close to Halloween.

“Just another routine call,” Bob told himself.

But something in his gut told him otherwise. Too many strange things had been going on in Haven over the past couple of months. He had been Death’s intern in North America for close to four years, a record according to Constantine. At this point in time, he couldn’t ignore his gut. It had kept him and the team alive on multiple occasions. It was also his intuition that had pushed adding undercover team members to the local police forces in the area. After Eric left to join the Order of Witches, they had lost a tremendous asset on the force.

Bob took another sip before glancing in the rear-view mirror of the truck. His sandy-blond hair was cut short in a military high and tight, and his eyes were taking on a gray color. With the arrival of Death’s Reapers back on earth, something was happening to all the interns. He wasn’t sure how, but he stopped aging. If anything, he was feeling younger each day. Maybe it was the gifts that came with being Death’s intern, but he doubted it. Interns had a tendency to die fast. Bob wondered if Isis and Bartholomew, the newly made Reapers, had something to do with it.

“You don’t have all day to philosophize on the meaning of life,” Bob reminded himself. It was on rare occasions that he had time alone to think. They were short on staff this evening. “Time to run a city again.”

He climbed out of the truck and adjusted his leather vest. The black vest with little skulls stenciled on it was a gift from the Union Station crew. They called it his uniform. For the last few years, Bob had dressed similarly every day, pressed kakis, button-down shirt, and a vest. The outfit was comfortable, yet presentable, without looking stuffy. It also gave him plenty of places to conceal his weapons and scythe. After too many close calls, he agreed to carry the official weapon of Death's intern, a silver scythe.

Ensuring his pants were over his steel-toe boots, he headed towards the back of Kings Park. An officer in his mid-twenties, with a caramel complexion and short, black hair, marched briskly to meet him. Bob inspected the young man, recalling when he hired him. He was a witch originally from New England but had moved to Haven after the military. The man was efficient and needed little training. Bob was pleased when he agreed to work in the human police force as their informant.

"Boss," the officer said in a low voice as soon as he reached him. "Sorry to call you so late, but you said any weird cases to call you directly."

"You did the right thing. What do we have, Miguel?"

Officer Miguel Rodriguez turned on his heel, and Bob followed. The two were about the same height, close to six feet three inches, with long strides. They crossed the park at a rapid pace.

"Male shifter in his early twenties, in apparent good health, dead with a hard on," Miguel laid out the facts.

"What?" Bob stopped, and the officer turned to stare at him.

"That's exactly what I thought," the officer replied. "He doesn't have any wounds or marks on him. Shifters are hard to kill."

They reached the crime scene and Bob stared at the dead body.

"Nobody has moved him?" Bob asked, walking around the corpse.

"Not that I'm aware," Miguel replied. "I was doing my rounds around town and saw the Harley in the parking lot. The park closes at ten, so I inspected and found him like this. Heart attack?"

"I'm not sure." Bob bent down to for a closer look. "I don't know much about heart attacks, but I would assume most victims would clutch their chest not their package."

Miguel rubbed his neck and shook his head.

"Call the Station and have them send us the paramedics," said Bob. "We need to get this body out of here before anyone else decides to stop by for a midnight stroll."

“On it.” Miguel pulled his cell phone out.

Bob took his own phone out to photograph the scene. He didn’t want to touch anything before taking all his photos.

“Why are you here alone?” Bob asked the corpse but stopped to examine the park. “Are you still here?”

One of his duties as Death’s intern was to help lost souls transition to their next destination. If a soul was lost, he would have felt their presence. At times, the interns and, of course, their two Reapers, were the only ones that could see the souls of the departed. They could even touch them. At first, that gift made life very difficult for Bob since he struggled to distinguish the living from the dead. It took him a few years to recognize the auras of the living compared to the glow of the dead.

“He’s gone.” The musical voice of Death came from behind him.

“Hi boss,” Bob replied without looking back.

He finished taking his photos before facing the horseman. Bob had learned from experience talking with Death that it was easy to forget your tasks when they appeared. At this time, he needed to get photos done before his squad came in and trampled the whole thing.

“I’m almost done,” Bob added, walking the scene clockwise.

“No rush,” said Death, walking in the opposite direction.

“Did you see anything? Or can you tell me?” Bob knew Death was picky in the information they shared.

The focus for Death and her interns was the souls. Bob was in a unique situation. When Isis, his predecessor and now Death’s top Reaper, stayed in Texarkana, the area became Haven. The only supernatural community in the world. The other interns were probably too smart to pick up that responsibility. When Bob took over, the responsibility of sheriff and protector came with the job.

“He didn’t suffer,” Death finally said, standing next to Bob, facing the body.

“That’s a relief,” Bob added.

“Maybe.” Death looked at the body. “He was confused. Like not sure what happened or why. He kept looking around for someone. Then gave up once he realized he was dead, and we moved on.”

Bob turned to face his boss. For the deceased, Death appears to them in whatever form they believed Death should be. Some saw a distant family member, others have seen the stereotypical grim Reaper. The options were

endless. Constantine decided that having every member of Reapers Inc. and the Union Station crew see a different version of Death would be very difficult for business. He made an executive decision. Being Death's right-hand man, or more specifically, right-hand cat, gave him the authority for such things. Maybe it was his five thousand years of life that gave Constantine wisdom and insight into the human condition.

Constantine's suggestion was simple. Death would appear to the Reaper crew, and everyone that worked for them at Union Station, as the version Isis saw. The version was of a tall, beautiful woman, with silky black hair and a caramel complexion. It minimized confusion, and new crewmembers instantly recognized their ultimate boss.

"Did you see anyone?" Bob glanced around the area.

"If someone was here, they were long gone by the time I arrived," Death announced. "A sad situation. Meaning they left this poor boy to die alone."

"Interesting." Bob leaned back down to examine the area around the body.

Death followed, placing a knee on the ground.

"Are you sure you want to get that suit dirty?" Bob teased, as he eyed the white Prada suit Death wore that evening.

"If it doesn't get dirty, I won't have a reason to change it," Death replied with a wicked grin.

"Do you need a reason? I figured you just enjoyed modeling the latest outfits of each runway." Bob had to admit, Death's style was impressive. If fashion designers ever needed a model, they should consult the horseman.

"Not at all, but it makes me sound less shallow." Death leaned over in Bob's direction. "By the way, what are you looking for?"

"No idea," Bob admitted. "Footprints, trash, a note. You name it. I'm looking for a reason why a shifter died in my park."

"Does the passing of a soul need a reason?" Death asked in a more solemn tone.

"Not always." Bob glanced back towards Death. "But I have a hard time believing this kid had a heart attack while randomly laying in a park with his pants down."

Death patted him on the shoulder and stood. "Never stop asking why, Bob. Things are never as simple as they seem. Keep me posted on what you find."

"Leaving so soon?" Bob asked.

“Crawling around looking for prints sounds like intern’s work,” Death replied. “I have a meeting with Pestilence that I should be fairly late for by now.”

Death smiled and Bob saluted his boss as she disappeared. Bob turned back toward the body and cautiously searched the pockets of the pants. He found a cell phone and a can of dip.

“Who are you, my friend?” Bob asked the body.

“This way,” Miguel said to the new arrivals.

Bob glanced to see TJ and Triplet-3 rushing behind the officer, both wearing Reaper’s EMT uniforms, black cargo pants, combat boots and long-sleeved hoodies with their logo. Uniforms were a recent addition to the team. The only difference between the EMT uniforms and the rest of the crew was the symbol of two snakes twisting up a staff on the front.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” Bob greeted them standing up.

TJ and Triplet-3 stopped in front of the body and saluted Bob. “Good evening, boss,” they said in unison.

“I’m going to kill Pete for drilling that into all of you,” Bob informed them.

Triplet-3 giggled, but TJ shifted uncomfortably.

“You are the boss,” Triplet-3 said. “People need to know and respect that.”

“Right.” Bob waved a hand at them. “Relax now.”

Pete, the Pixie, had taken over the training for all the recruits at the Station. The training now borderline in military precision. Bob enjoyed the discipline the team had, but the layer of formality drove him nuts. Granted, fighting that was a lost cause. Constantine encouraged the behavior. Hard to fight when the second in command approves of the madness.

“Are you ready for us?” TJ asked.

“As ready as I’ll be,” Bob admitted. “I need to know the cause of death and time.”

“At least he went happy,” Triplet-3 said, examining the man.

“That’s one way to put it.” Bob shook his head. “TJ, are you okay?”

TJ blinked several times, then focused back on Bob. “Yeah, I knew him.”

Bob and Triplet-3 both stood still, watching TJ.

“Sorry, man.” Triplet-3 patted TJ’s shoulder.

“We weren’t close,” TJ added. “His family moved to Haven a few years ago. They were starting over with a new pack. He was a good kid. At least,

that's what I hear."

"Do you need a minute?" Bob asked.

TJ shook his head. "No. I'm good. First solo mission without Doc."

"First dead body," Triplet-3 added.

"The job is hard," Bob told him. "Don't take this home. We have resources. Make sure to debrief."

"Yes sir," said TJ.

"Have Doc send me a report as soon as possible," Bob continued in his business tone.

"Going to be tough, boss," Triplet-3 informed him. "The weekend has been wild, and we still have tomorrow to deal with."

"Halloween in Haven is becoming the new attraction," said TJ.

"They need to go back to Salem with all this partying," Bob tried to keep the annoyance out of his voice. "We are still in the bible belt, with too many humans who don't know about the supernatural world. I would like to keep the madness to a minimum."

"We are losing that battle," Triplet-3 said.

"That's my fear." Bob handed the phone and dip to TJ. "Let me know as soon as possible. Glad you finally joined us."

"It pays better than the restaurant," said TJ with a genuine smile.

TJ had been a friend of the Reapers community for years. He even went so far as trying to date Isis once. That didn't end well when he failed to share with her that he was a shifter. They were friends again, but any romantic possibility went out the door. It had taken him a few years to decide he wanted to do more with his life. A few night classes had opened the doors to becoming an EMT. Bob jumped at the chance to hire him as soon as he graduated.

Vicious scenes and dead bodies were part of the job of working for Death. Bob wished TJ's first mission alone wasn't a person he knew. Then again, he lived in Haven as well. Many of the people he would see were people he knew. At least TJ had Triplet-3 with him. It was too late to remedy Shorty's horrible naming practice. Triplet-3 was not a triplet at all. His only crime was being best friends with two other people who all had the same name. Now they were the Triplets, and nobody even knew their real names.

"I really hate Halloween," Bob told himself as he reached his truck.

Chapter Three



Bartholomew had hoped for a boring day at Reapers. Unfortunately, it appeared the universe had other plans for him. Constantine had woken up in a rage. The self-professed king of the supernatural YouTube, the Feline extraordinaire as he also called himself, received an anonymous tip on Discord that his YouTube channel had been hacked. Who in their right mind would declare war on a feline with more money than God was a mystery Bartholomew was currently engaged in solving.

Constantine was pacing on the kitchen table at Reapers. Bartholomew knew the situation was serious. The cat was vindictive enough to send an aerial strike of drones to the fool and take out an entire neighborhood for this offense. But Bartholomew couldn't help but smile. This madness, him sitting at his command post behind five monitors and three laptops and Constantine pacing, was home.

He never expected that Death's new intern, a twenty something female with jet-black hair and a mocha complexion, would change his life. In those first five years since becoming Death's Ward, he had seen at least fourteen interns across the world come and go. They didn't last long. Their life expectancy was pretty short. Then they went to chill in the river Styx to wait for the apocalypse. Bartholomew had liked Isis from the beginning, and deep in his soul he had prayed she would last more than a few months.

Seven years later, Isis was now his big sister. They still lived at Reapers. Immortality was something he could truly come to terms with, knowing he would not be alone. It wouldn't be just the cat and him following Death

around. For the first time, he had a living family. Well, as alive as you could be after being made a Reaper after his death. Isis became a Reaper to save him. But that was a story he worked hard to put aside.

“What are siblings for?” she always reminded him.

“I’m going to make them famous, just so I can destroy them,” Constantine shouted from the table, bringing Bartholomew back to the present.

“Once again, you are not Eminem,” Bartholomew shouted back. “You can’t use that line. He did it first.”

“Fine!” Constantine stopped pacing. “We are going to find them and send them to hell.”

Bartholomew stopped typing and turned to face the deranged cat. “For real?”

“Why not?” Constantine replied, waving a paw in the air. “Jake owes me a favor. What is one more soul going to do to the devil?”

“One more soul probably nothing, but I’m sure they are not dead,” Bartholomew explained. “You do remember we are not in the killing business. And Jake does not take the living in hell.”

Constantine scratched his face in a too human type of gesture. “Fine! I got a better plan.”

“Every time you say ‘fine,’ the situation goes from bad to worse.” Bartholomew turned back to his monitors. “Why can’t we just hack their server and take them out? Send a couple of Trojan horses their way and empty their accounts. You know, typical online espionage.”

“How would they know it was me?”

Bartholomew dropped his head. “Why do they need to know?” he mumbled to himself.

“So they won’t do it again, duh.” Constantine resumed his march.

Bartholomew shook his head. The cat had totally lost perspective. The poor soul who had dared to cross paths with Constantine would truly wish he never saw a computer in his life.

“Yes, Godmother,” Isis’s voice filled the loft as she emerged from the back rooms. “I will make sure to bring a hood and long-sleeved clothes. Of course, I will make sure to not disrespect anyone there.”

Bartholomew glanced in her direction while his fingers flew over the keyboard. Constantine sat on the table, taking his favorite pose as a Sphinx.

“Where is she going?” Bartholomew mouthed to the cat.

“Hell, if she is meeting up with that crazy witch Virginia,” Constantine replied in a normal tone.

“Be nice.” Isis swatted Constantine on the side as she passed the table. She kissed Bartholomew on the forehead and dropped her suitcase next to him.

Isis was stunning. A fact Bartholomew could now appreciate. Her silver eyes, the same colors as his and those of every Reaper, added an extra layer of magnetism to her personality. When she first moved in, Isis was bigger than life to him, yet he never understood the attraction every guy felt towards her. After puberty and finally finding girls attractive, he got it. His sister was truly hot and had a great personality.

This realization made him a bit more protective of her. Isis, at times, was too nice and men were pigs. It was a blessing she was also one of the deadliest beings on the planet. Or Bartholomew would have a hard time sleeping.

On the other hand, he was sure Isis would never stop worrying about him. She felt the same way about the girls who were interested in him. While his body was that of a mid-twenties man, with an incredible muscular structure and a perfect tan, his sister still saw a twelve-year-old boy. He wanted to be mad but having a sister that spoiled him was something he would never turn down.

Isis snapped her fingers in front of his face. “What are you working on?”

“Sorry,” Bartholomew replied. “Looking for the delinquent who hacked Constantine’s account.”

Isis looked back and forth between Constantine and her brother. “Please, do not bomb that kid’s house.”

“How do you know it was a kid?” Constantine demanded.

“Only a kid would be stupid enough to start a war with a maniacal cat.” Isis tapped her foot as she crossed her arms over her chest. “I’ll be gone three days, please, I repeat. Do not burn down the town. I should be home by Halloween.”

“Where are you going?” Bartholomew interrupted her.

“Egypt.”

Bartholomew glanced discreetly at Constantine.

“Has your crazy godmother finally decided to mummify herself and rid the world of her presence?” Constantine asked, licking his fur.

“I swear the two of you really need to get over this weird love-hate relationship you both have,” Isis announced.

“What love?” questioned Constantine. “The only thing I have for her ass is disdain. Now, why are you going there?”

Isis waved her hands over her head, ignoring the comment. “The local convent has asked for help. It appears they found the tomb of Set. They think his tomb has been disturbed.”

“Is it safe for you to be there?” Bartholomew asked, leaning forward in his seat.

“As long as I don’t use my powers near it, I should be fine,” she replied. “I’m just curious who would be crazy enough to disturb an old god.”

“Good question,” said Constantine as Bartholomew turned to face his screen.

Bartholomew wasn’t good at lying to Isis. It was easier to avoid the entire conversation instead of trying to cover up any potential mission he and Bob might have done on a previous year.

“Anyway, I’m taking the jet,” she informed them. “Would you guys be okay without it for a few days?”

“We have no plans to leave Haven, at least until after All Souls’ Day.” Bartholomew was the one who answered. “Are you sure you will make it back for your birthday?”

“I will be here.” Isis smiled, making her eyes sparkle. “I would not miss the day of the dead in Haven. Got to go. Tell Eugene and Bob I’ll see them on Thursday for Halloween.”

She grabbed her carry-on and disappeared. One perk of being a Reaper was Death’s gift of teleportation. Isis had more of Death’s gifts, since she was technically Death’s intern at the time of her transformation. Superhuman strength, teleportation, and magical powers, like knocking people out, were some of the few that Bartholomew also inherited.

“If she finds out you were in Egypt and didn’t tell her, we are dead,” Constantine said as he stared at the space Isis vacated.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” Bartholomew lied, not looking away from his computer.

“Smart boy,” Constantine approved, nodding his head. “Have you found the bastard yet?”

“Found three different IP addresses and have a feeling we might have multiple culprits.” Bartholomew was back to typing away.

The front door of the loft opened, and Bob peered inside cautiously. "Should I be afraid to come in?"

Bob lived on the first floor of Reapers Inc. The massive building was the original headquarters for the team, before operations moved to Union Station in downtown Texarkana. A small firing range, a gym, and the garage for the vehicles were still at Reapers, Inc. The building also housed all the living areas for Death's intern and other visiting interns.

"Why would you be afraid? You live here," Constantine answered, as he licked some very inappropriate body parts on the table.

"Because it's seven in the morning on a Sunday and you are both wide awake," Bob answered, making his way towards the kitchen.

Even after his promotion, Bob was still Reapers' official chef. The loft kitchen wasn't as impressive as the one at the Station, but this one was all his. Bartholomew giggled as he watched the older man busy himself with pots and pans.

"You are also up early for a Sunday, not your normal schedule," Bartholomew informed him.

"Long days," answered Bob. "I want to go in and go over paperwork before tomorrow. I'm behind on reports, and court is going to take all day. So, what are you two doing?"

"Going to destroy the fools that hacked my YouTube account."

Bob stopped, holding a pot in mid-air, and faced his two friends. Bartholomew nodded solemnly, and Bob visibly swallowed hard.

"Do Isis and Death know about this?" Bob asked, slowly putting down the pot to stare at the two culprits.

"Isis just left, heading to Egypt to check on that Set tomb," Constantine said nonchalantly. Bob leaned against the fridge, waiting for the bomb to drop.

"She said not to burn down the neighborhood and took off," Bartholomew added quickly, before Bob had a heart attack. "Constantine also may not send the fools to hell. I recommend a much calmer attack."

"What's your definition of calm?"

"I recommend we just wipe out their finances and crash all their servers," Bartholomew informed him.

"I say we wipe out their houses and drop a flag on their asses claiming it property of yours truly," Constantine rebutted.

“Is there an option C, like hacking their accounts and filling their feed with cute kitten videos?” Bob asked, regaining himself and searching for a mixing bowl to avoid eye contact.

“The kitten idea is a keeper, but we are still destroying them,” Constantine went back to war mode.

“I second Isis’s plea, don’t burn down the town,” Bob added softly.

“Isis doesn’t plead, she just demands,” Bartholomew corrected him.

“True.”

All three laughed, releasing the tension in the loft. Bob pulled out eggs, milk, and other food items from the fridge. Constantine continued his inappropriate cleaning, while Bartholomew went back to typing when his phone beeped. A quick glance made him stop.

“Uh oh,” he said.

“What?” asked Constantine with one leg in the air.

“Isis just texted,” Bartholomew announced. “A delegation of witches will be here this week to get ready for Halloween.”

“Why?” Constantine dropped his leg. “They have an entire city, hell, the whole state of Massachusetts. Why do they want Texas?”

“Seriously, boss?” Bob asked from the kitchen counter. “Are you comparing that tiny state with Texas?”

“Point taken.” Constantine pursed his lips. “Still, Salem is the certifiable Mecca for witches. They need to stay up north and leave the rest of us alone. Let’s be honest, Halloween is bad enough without witches running wild.”

“It doesn’t help we had a weird death last night.”

“Weird, how?” Bartholomew jumped in.

“Pull up my photos from the crime scene,” Bob offered. “I uploaded them to my drive last night.”

The blessing of Bartholomew being a computer genius, he had automated all the systems between Reapers and the Station. He had created share folders on their server for easy access across locations. Pulling Bob’s file was less than three clicks for him.

“Oh damn,” Bartholomew shouted. “Please tell me he died happy.”

“What?” Constantine joined in and quickly leaped from the table to Bartholomew’s command post. “Why is that boy holding on to his penis? Was it ripped off?”

“Did you have to go there?” Bartholomew asked.

“Don’t tell me he doesn’t look suspicious.”

“He is dead, boss,” Bob agreed with the cat.

“What did Death say?” Constantine asked, analyzing the photos with Bartholomew.

“She found him alone. Confused, but nothing out of the ordinary for the newly deceased.”

“So, what’s bothering you?” Constantine faced Bob.

“A young shifter in his early twenties doesn’t just end up dead in a park, regardless of his nakedness stage.” Bob dropped a few chopped onions into the bowl and scrambled the eggs.

“Let me know what you find,” Bartholomew said. “I’m definitely curious.”

“I’ll keep you posted, but what about these witches?”

“That’s all she texted,” Bartholomew replied. “As soon as I find out more, I’ll let you know. Now, what are you making?”

“Omelets.” Bob smiled for the first time all morning.

“Need help?” Bartholomew stood from the chair.

“Where are you going? We need to find the enemy and destroy them.” Constantine shouted.

“I’m all in, but first food. I was up for hours.”

“You are a Reaper. You don’t need food,” Constantine reminded him.

“Neither do you, but that hasn’t stopped you before.” Bartholomew rubbed the top of Constantine’s head, earning him a slap from the cat.

At least Constantine avoided having his claws out or shifting to something more dangerous to attack him.

“Fine, we can have a food break,” Constantine conceded. “Where is Eugene?”

“Asleep,” Bob announced. “Something the rest of us should do more often.”

“He doesn’t get a lot at the lab,” Bartholomew explained. “Even though he had that promotion from Pestilence, he is still the rookie. He still gets stuck doing all the rookie jobs.”

“Don’t feel bad for him. You know he loves his job,” Bob defended his friend.

“Gross!” Constantine hacked up an invisible hairball. “Nobody should be forced to work for that quack Pestilence.”

“Nobody forces her interns. They truly love her,” Bob continued.

Bartholomew and Constantine rolled their eyes. Pestilence was definitely one of their least favorite horsemen. While she had improved during the last few years, Bartholomew was sure she would be the bringer of the apocalypse, or maybe Famine. The jury was still out with those two.

“Do we wake him?” Bartholomew asked, looking at all the pots Bob was working with.

“No need,” Bob said. “Once this bacon cooks, he will find his way here.”

“Works for me,” said Bartholomew. “What do you need me to do?”

“Grab the juicer from the pantry and start with the oranges,” Bob instructed. “Going to be a long day. Let’s eat well.”

Bartholomew saluted and went to work. He really loved his home. Regardless of the madness, there was nothing like family.

Chapter Four



Nikita woke up naked on her couch. Her neck ached from the awkward position she fell asleep in. At least she could direct her attention to something else besides her failed plan. She had stayed up all night monitoring her police scanner for the news of the death. But nothing. There wasn't even a 911 call reporting the body. The whole situation was ludicrous. Wake Village had constant patrols around the small city. With a population of less than six thousand people in a mostly residential area, dead bodies were hard to miss.

At five am, she decided to do something about it. Dressing in her shorts, a hoodie, and her Adidas, she took a jog down to the park. From her place at the Arista Apartments in Pleasant Grove, it was less than four and a half miles to Kings Park. Not a bad run for a Sunday morning. Too bad the trip was a waste of her time. The body was gone, and the scene was cleared.

She was planning to report the body herself, informing the cops she found it on her morning jog. There went that plan. Frustrated with herself, she kept on running until the sun came out. She had run almost seventeen miles by the time she made it back to her apartment. Her anger had simmered, but she needed something else to do. Instead of showering, she undressed in the middle of the living room and did a round of kickboxing.

Drenched with sweat, she dropped onto the leather couch and passed out. Three hours later, sticky and smelling like a wet dog, she rolled from the couch. The sun was blazing, and she had wasted her morning away.

"Everything is not a total loss," she told herself.

Taking her time, she strolled towards her kitchen. The apartment was quiet. One of the luxury apartments in the area. It was fancy, yet not the most grandiose place she had ever been in. But for the small town, it was almost over the top, especially for a single woman in the area. The decor was gothic, with dark-leather furniture and black curtains everywhere. She dropped a cup of Arabian coffee in the machine and headed towards the bathroom.

She pulled the Epsom salt from the sink counter and turned on the hot water in the tub. That was one thing she really appreciated about the place. The bathroom was incredible, and so was the large walk-in closet. It would take the tub at least ten minutes to fill. Plenty of time to make her calls and drink the coffee. She strolled back to the living room and found her cell.

“Hi Mickey,” Nikita purred as soon as the call connected.

“Well, hello beautiful,” Mickey replied from the other side. “What do I owe the pleasure on this fabulous Sunday morning?”

“Is it too early to place an order?”

“For you, it’s never too early or late. What do you need?”

Nikita could hear a keyboard from the other side of the line.

“The drops were amazing. Need to order three more batches,” she whispered.

“Same strength?” Mickey asked.

“Unless you have something that works slower?”

If she could give herself a bit more room in her retreats, it could be beneficial.

“I have a new one, hasn’t been tested more than a few times, but it is supposed to take effect in twelve hours,” he answered.

“Ummm.” Nikita marched to the kitchen and took her brew. Sipping her coffee, black of course, she leaned against the counter. “That could have its uses. Send me a couple and I’ll see what I can do.”

“Absolutely,” said Mickey cheerfully. “By the way, are you looking for any more work?”

Nikita stopped. In the past couple of years, she had accumulated a pretty enormous fortune doing special jobs for those who could afford it. Mickey was one of her most reliable sources. But the jobs were intense, and at times took time to set up.

“What do you have?” she asked calmly.

“Nothing that involves too much trouble for you and should be in line with your own objectives,” he said.

“I’m listening.” She sipped her coffee.

“You are still in Haven, right?”

“Right.”

“Just need the grandson of one of the clan leaders to disappear,” he said smoothly.

“Oh, that’s all,” Nikita teased back.

“What’s another wolf?” Mickey said playfully. “The payout is six figures. You are already on the hunt.”

“Who wants his head?”

“It seems everything is not cozy in Haven,” Mickey informed her. “A new pack is trying to move in and wants a few ones out of commission. The young pup has dreams of expansion and will marry a competing pack to unify the fold.”

“Oh, so very altruistic of him,” Nikita added, rolling her eyes.

“Right! If he was marrying a dog, I might be impressed but bet you dinner the lucky lady is a hottie.”

“They always are.” Nikita glanced at the clock and rushed to the bathroom. She made it just in time to avoid the bathtub from flooding. “Damn.” She would need to empty the thing a bit before she could climb in.

“Is everything alright?” Mickey asked.

“Bath issues, the usual.” She pulled the plug and watched as the water diminished below the edge of the tub.

“You and this crazy bath obsession.” Mickey laughed from his end. “You are the cleanest assassin I have ever met.”

“Assassin sounds so evil. I’m more of a liquidator, helping businesses expand at their own pace.”

Water secured to the correct level, Nikita poured the salt and enough Japanese Jasmine soap to fill the thing with bubbles.

“That’s what we are calling it now?” Mickey mused from his end. “Are you planning to start a non-profit for the souls of the survivors?”

“Technically, I have several, if you must know.” Nikita walked back towards the living room. “If you are interested in contributing, just let me know. I’ll forward the forms.”

“Aren’t you sweet?”

“Always.”

Nikita picked up the basket she had dropped on the living room table. She threw the food in the trash but dropped the cape and the rest of the clothes she was wearing in the fireplace.

“So, do you want the job or not?” Mickey brought the conversation back to business.

“Why not? One more wolf out of the way could be the best thing for everyone.” She lit the fireplace and watched the flames dance over the clothes. “Also, send me a Browning X Bolt as well.”

“The rifle?” Mickey said quickly. “Since when do you use guns for your jobs?”

“I don’t,” Nikita replied, stepping away from the fire. “Planning to give it as a gift to a friend. She is planning a hunting trip and needs a suitable weapon.”

“That is definitely an understatement, but I got you.” Mickey was back to typing as the sound of the keyboard came across the phone. “Anything else you need?”

“Just the usual. Send me the facts on the mark and I’ll do the rest.”

“It’s in your inbox already. The vials will arrive by Wednesday.”

“Always a pleasure, Mickey.”

“Bye.”

Nikita disconnected the call. With the evidence destroyed, there wasn’t anything else to do about Jason’s situation. Maybe her informant would find out what happened to the body. Taking a deep breath, Nikita stretched her back, making her joints pop. From the fridge, she took a bottle of tequila. She should eat something, but she wasn’t in the mood.

The smell of Japanese Jasmine filled the bathroom and she immediately relaxed as she entered. She placed the bottle of tequila and the phone at the edge of the tub and slowly stepped inside. The water was scorching, and she embraced the sensation going up her body. She gave herself a few minutes to adjust to the heat before submerging her head under the water. The heat was amazing, and her muscles immediately relaxed.

She emerged from the water and leaned back in the tub. Nikita hated it when her plans did not come through. It was hard to send a message if people never heard about the bodies.

“What to do?” she asked herself, taking the tequila and drinking from the bottle.

The liquid burned going down, but she enjoyed it as much as her bath. She did her best thinking in the water. Her phone buzzed and she reached for it.

“Interesting,” Nikita told herself. She connected the call and spoke, “Hello.”

“Hi, Lacy, long time,” a female said.

Nikita hadn’t used that alias in years. She really should write down how many names she currently had. It would be a fiasco if any of her contacts found out her real name.

“Last time I checked, we were on non-speaking terms,” Nikita replied.

“But what is a minor disagreement among friends?” said the female.

“I didn’t realize we were friends, Rebecca.” Nikita stretched her leg out of the tub, letting the bubbles cover her skin.

“Maybe not friends, but how about great business partners?” Rebecca corrected herself.

“We should work on your definitions.” Nikita leaned her head against the tub again. “If I’m not mistaken, you tried to kill me. What makes you think I’m interested in talking to you?”

“I have a were that I need to go missing,” Rebecca cut the games.

“Why should I care?” Nikita took another sip of the tequila.

“I thought you were on a mission to rid the world of all those wolves.”

“Let me refresh my memory. The reason you tried to kill me was because I attacked a werewolf.” Nikita eyed the phone but couldn’t help but smile. “Now you want me to kill one. What am I missing?”

“The two-timing bastard cheated on me with my best friend,” Rebecca confessed.

“That sounds like you have a typical man problem, nothing to do with being a shifter.” Nikita played with the bottle of tequila. “You had your chance at seeing Roy gone and you stopped me. Not interested.”

“Rumors have it you are heading to Haven,” Rebecca informed her, making Nikita freeze in the tub.

“Really?”

“He moved to Haven with his crew three months ago,” Rebecca confessed. “He likes them young, Lacy. I didn’t know. I’m trying to make it right.”

“You should have left him a long time ago, it’s a bit too late to make it right,” Nikita informed her. “Unfortunately, I’m not heading to Haven. I

have business in Salem for the season. Maybe next time, dear.”

Nikita hung up before Rebecca could reply. Their friendship was long dead, and Nikita was a believer she did not repeat mistakes. Doing Rebecca a favor, or even a business deal, was out of the question. Saving society from a piece of shit womanizer was a different story.

It seemed her Sunday would not be a total waste. She had plenty of time now to find, oh Sweet Roy, and figure out what he had been doing all this time. It wouldn't be hard to find him in town. With the reputation of a bad boy, all she needed to do was check all the local bars and clubs. The rest should be pretty simple.

“But let's make sure nobody else knows I'm in town,” Nikita told herself. She found the number for her operator and dialed it.

“Hi, Janet,” said Nikita as cheerfully as possible.

“Hi, Rachel,” an older lady replied with the voice of a person who had been smoking ten packs of cigarettes a day for twenty years. “I wasn't expecting a call for another week.”

“Change of plans,” Nikita informed her. “Got a contract in Salem. Will be out for another four weeks.”

“You know we can only approve three independent jobs at a time,” Janet said roughly.

“True, but I'm your best closer.” Nikita went back to her bottle.

“It doesn't matter,” Janet added. “If others found out how much leeway you are given, they could get jealous.”

“But I thought you wanted me to take more time off,” Nikita pouted to give her voice an even more childlike tone.

The sound of Janet breathing deeply came clear from the phone. “I said you should take a vacation, head to Haven. Not to take a job in Salem.”

“What difference does it make where I am when I'm off?” Nikita knew the game, but it was fun to play dumb.

“You know it's for your protection. If things go bad, we can't help you.”

“I understand,” Nikita lied. “I'll finish this job and think about the vacation after Halloween. Hard to get out of Salem with the holidays.”

“That's my girl,” Janet replied. “Let me know as soon as you get in.”

“Of course.”

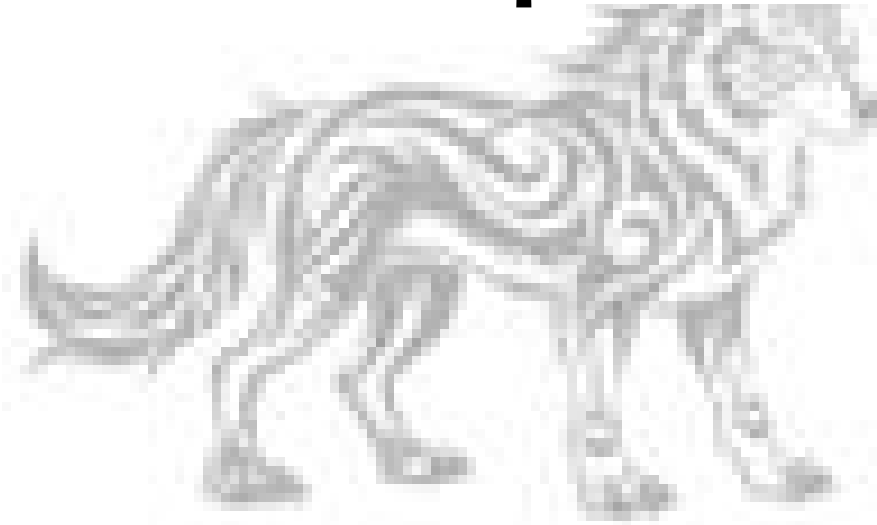
Nikita disconnected the call and changed the location of her VPN.

“It's sad when you have to lie to your own people,” said Nikita. “But if you want me here so bad, it's time to disappear. Something bad is heading

my way.”

Nikita eased back down in the tub and relaxed. She could worry about the guild later. Her phones were untraceable, as well as her money. Making herself invisible was something she had plenty of practice with.

Chapter Five



It had taken Bob most of the morning and even a few hours in the afternoon to go over all the reports on his desk. He moved the last file to his outbox and leaned back in his chair. Glancing at the stack to his left, he just exhaled. He still needed to review the case files for court the following day. It blew Bob's mind how much paperwork it took to run a city. The sad part, he didn't have to worry about utilities, road constructions, and all the other random stuff the local cities handled.

Yet, the stacks of reports never ended. He was sure he could wallpaper his office and even Constantine's study with the amount of paper they accumulated per week. Bartholomew had suggested automating some of their files. The crew had protested, but Bob was seriously rethinking the idea. It would be more cost effective and even better for the environment if they invested in intense computer classes instead of the reams of paper they went through.

He needed to figure out the best way to approach the situation. Eighty percent of their staff were made of transient individuals. Many were down on their luck, people that ended up in Texarkana on their way to other locations. Texarkana still had transients who refused to work for Reapers or even take shelter at the Station. They couldn't force anyone to join. Constantine mandated hot meals were provided to all that wanted food twice a day.

It took months before many of the remaining local transients trusted them enough to take the meals. They had no issues going to the local churches,

but not Death's Crew, as they were called. Bob understood that very well. For years, he had been one of those transient folks. He worked for food and found shelter in any abandoned building he could find, but he never trusted people. People had a way of letting you down or expecting more than you could give.

Isis was different. She made it a point to befriend him, even when he pushed her away. Their mutual background of military service had created a bridge she used to connect with him. Bob smiled and shook his head. Isis never took no for an answer and went out of her way to make sure he was fed every day.

"Thank you, God, for bringing that crazy girl into my life," Bob repeated the silent prayer before leaving his office. He had been saying the same one for over three years.

That connection had saved his life in more ways than he could count. Bob would not let her down, or the Reapers crew. Having a family came with great responsibilities, but he would never run away from that again. After years of mental illness and struggles, he found purpose again. He never expected it would be working for Death and a talking cat.

"Boss, here are the lattes," Nicolas said, knocking on the door.

Bob was startled from his contemplations and smiled at the young man. Nicolas was short and stocky. Not as short as Shorty, who was barely five feet tall. But Nicolas was all muscle. The young man had curly, black hair and had the friendliest disposition Bob had seen in years. He reminded him a bit of Bartholomew when he was younger.

Nicolas moved down from Denver with his family to start a new life. A shifter from an Irish and Puerto Rican family, Nicolas was a blast to be around. The man had more energy than any of the other new recruits. They had forbidden him from ever drinking coffee on duty. Last time he did, he spoke so fast nobody could understand him. Not to mention he was bouncing off the walls, literally. It was interesting he was delivering Bob's lattes.

"Did Pete see you with those?" Bob asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I told him they were for you," Nicolas replied, glancing down at the floor. "He did say he would check with you to make sure all the cups were delivered. I'm not that bad on coffee."

"Nicolas, you bounced so much you fell down the stairs."

"I tripped," Nicolas explained.

“Twice?”

“We have a lot of steps,” Nicolas added.

“On two separate occasions.” Bob tapped his pen and waited for further arguments.

“But the lattes are so good,” Nicolas shouted as he waved his hands in the air. “How many jobs have their own espresso makers in the employee’s break room? With homemade cookies. Scones. The scones are amazing. And the donuts. Did I mention the donuts?”

“Nicolas, I work here, remember?” Bob interrupted the young man's food review.

“Boss, please.” Nicolas dropped to one knee, making him disappear behind the desk. “I will work extra shifts if you just let me get lattes again!”

Bob leaned over his desk to watch the young man on his knees pleading. Bob shook his head. “Nicolas, you have problems.”

“What?” Nicolas looked up, with huge puppy eyes. “But.” Lips pouted.

“No,” Bob finally told him. “You need to report to our addiction center and talk to a counselor.”

“Boss.” Nicolas jumped to his feet. “I’m not on drugs. I swear.”

“Oh, I know that,” Bob agreed. “But you have a horrible caffeine addiction that is driving you nuts. Whenever the counselors give you clearance, you can resume with coffee again, as long as it’s caffeine-free. In the meantime, no.”

“Boss, life is not fair.”

“You didn’t taste either of these lattes?” Bob glanced suspiciously at both cups in front of him.

“I tried, but Mr. Pete had the sergeant escort me up the stairs,” Nicolas confessed.

“Why?”

“He was afraid I would trip again and burn myself.” Nicolas pouted. “I guess I will go back to work.”

“I mean it, Nicolas,” Bob informed him. “If you go through the evaluation with the counselors and they say you are clear, I will sponsor you to have coffee again, caffeine-free.”

“People are going to laugh at me for going to counseling for coffee.” Nicolas kicked his foot on the carpet.

“That’s actually the one reason nobody is ever going to laugh at you for,” Bob said with a stern voice. “Ninety-five percent of all the team is going to

counseling for one thing or another. Yours is not the wildest one we have. Take care of yourself and don't worry about what others think."

"Really?" A small smile reached the corners of Nicolas's face. "Then I can have coffee again?"

"In moderation and no caffeine," Bob clarified.

"Thanks, boss." Nicolas saluted and rushed out of the office.

Bob made a note on his desk calendar to check with the counselors regarding Nicolas. Coffee was not the worst thing Nicolas could be hooked on, but Bob wanted to make sure it didn't get replaced with other things. He took a sip from one latte and savored the moment. Nicolas was right, they had the best caramel coffee macchiato. He had always been a black coffee kind of guy, and he still preferred his own blend. But Isis got him started on these stupid fancy coffees, and he bought several espresso machines for the building.

It's technically Isis's fault Nicolas has developed a problem. Bob considered sharing his thoughts with the Reaper but decided against dying a quick death.

Instead, he took both cups and made his way towards the morgue. His office was on the top floor of the Station. After careful renovations by some incredible gnomes, the basement had been transformed to a state-of-the-art medical facility that doubled as their labs and morgue. The renovation included extra wide freezers to hold bodies. Bob was glad those were rarely used.

"Good afternoon, boss," a couple of new recruits greeted him on his way down.

Bob waved but never stopped. He'd learned the hard way that stopping to engage meant hours of delay. Bob did not know how Pete and Shorty managed to talk to everyone and never got stuck. That was one thing Bob really should pay attention to.

At least the lower levels were empty. Bob pushed the large, industrial-size door to the morgue open without breaking his stride. The cold of the place made him stop. The medical staff had a habit of lowering the temperature even more than human hospitals, especially when fresh cases were in. Three out of the four operating tables were filled with bodies.

Doctor Angela was working on the farthest from the door. While Bob couldn't see her face, covered by a shield, her black ponytail flopped around as she worked. As he reached her, he spotted the signs of her hard

labor. The once white scrub was smeared with blood, and Bob prayed it was from more than one of her patients. Bob took a quick look at the current victim and decided not to focus on the corpse. The doctor had opened the body from chin to groin, exposing all internal organs.

“Doctor!” Bob shouted over the sound of the drill she was using.

“What?” Angela screamed, glancing up at him.

“Coffee?” Bob extended one cup towards her.

“Oh boss, you are a saint.” She dropped the drill on the table next to the body and took the cup with a dirty glove.

“Would you like to wash up before drinking that?”

Lifting the face shield with her empty hand, she raised the cup towards her face. Inspecting her bloody handprint on the cup, she shook her head.

“I’m sure nobody would try to steal my cup now.” She gave him a toothy grin.

“Good point.” Saluted Bob with his cup. “Salud.”

“Cheers,” Angela replied. “This is heavenly. Thank you so much.”

“My pleasure.” Bob leaned against the opposite table. “How long have you been working, Angie?”

“The usual,” she lied.

“Right.” Bob waited.

“It’s not my fault we are short staffed, and I’m having to pull double, maybe triple shifts.”

“Well, technically it is.” Bob picked imaginary lint from his vest and avoided eye contact.

“Seriously?”

“I’m not saying it was a bad thing.” Bob raised his hands in defense. “Happy couples are great.”

“How was I supposed to know they would actually get married and move to Fiji.” Angela waved her hands in the air.

Bob moved farther away from the doctor just in case her latte became a projectile in his direction.

“You hear about romance in the workplace all the time,” Angela continued with her rambling. “It doesn’t mean people just pack up and leave. Now I’m stuck as the only doctor on duty at the morgue.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Bob jumped in. “We are trying to hire, but nobody is interested in moving before the holidays.”

“Which one?”

“Halloween, fortunately,” Bob rushed to clarify.

“Thank the goddess.” Angela took a long drink from her cup. “I doubt I would make it to Christmas.”

Bob held back a smile. Angela was one of the most progressive witches he had met. Not only did she celebrate all the holidays for her faith, she also did the Christian ones. She was a bicultural child, as she told him once, and she did not discriminate against any of her upbringing.

“Bartholomew is doing his best,” Bob told her.

“Bart is a cutie, isn’t he?” Angela mused out loud.

“Isn’t he a little young for you?” Bob, like Isis, still saw the young Reaper as a young boy. Women fawning over him was still strange for Bob.

“Life expectancy for witches differs from humans,” Angela added quickly. “I can wait.”

Bob took a minute to inspect the witch. With her dark, silky hair, milky-white complexion, and dark-brown eyes, she could pass for Snow White. Nobody would ever guess she was way past forty. Bob was sure she was even older than he was, but Angela looked barely twenty.

Taking a deep breath, Bob reminded himself that many of the new staff had never met Bartholomew before he became a Reaper. The only version they knew was of the hot guy with the silver eyes. The fact he was still a kid was something only close friends knew.

“But was he really a kid?” Bob found himself doing math in his head and realized Bartholomew would have turned eighteen this year if he hadn’t died. He wasn’t a kid, but officially an adult.

“Now that’s a scary thought,” Bob said to himself.

“What?”

“Sorry, just talking to myself.” Bob waved a hand in front of him. “Tell me what you found about the kid from the park.”

“Big-Bob! There you are!” Shorty shouted from the door.

Bob and Angela turned to face the newcomer. Shorty was Bob’s oldest friend, and one of the first members of the crew. A transient person as well, his transition to second in command to Bob had been almost miraculous. Gone was the scrawny man with twitchy eyes. A more confident and responsible version had developed, even if his fashion sense was still wild. He was wearing a white pin-stripe suit with a black fedora hat that made his chocolate complexion almost glow. Or maybe it was the weird lights of the morgue.

“Why do you look like you are trying out for a part in a musical with Sinatra?” Bob shook his head. At least the hat gave him a few inches.

“You are just jealous, my friend,” Shorty replied. “Besides, if the top boss can wear designer suits everywhere she goes, I can rock one as well.”

“And the hat?”

“I don’t know,” Angela jumped in. “I really like the hat.”

“Thank you, Angie,” replied Shorty. “I knew you were my favorite doc for a reason.”

Angela beamed back and raised her cup to Shorty.

“Why are you covered in blood?” At that moment, Shorty glanced at the body on the table and his face paled. Covering his mouth, he turned around. “You should warn a man there would be organs everywhere. I’m glad I missed lunch.”

“It’s the morgue, remember.” Angela pointed at the room. “What do you think I do here? Color my hair?”

“You have perfect hair,” Shorty informed her. “Nails would be more likely.”

“Thanks.” Angela stuck her tongue out at him and walked around the body.

“What do you need, Shorty?” Bob turned to his friend.

“I was planning to invite you to lunch, but we might need to wait on that.”

“Good,” Bob replied. “I still have work. Angie, can we get back to the body? What did you find out?”

“You will not like it. Besides being dead, he was in perfect health.”

“Explain, Angela.” Bob leaned forward to stare at the body.

“Perfectly healthy young men don’t just drop dead.” Shorty aimed his chin at the body.

“Who are you telling? I’m still waiting for the full lab results to identify everything we found in his stomach, but so far, according to my test, he died of a heart attack,” she explained. “Here is the problem. This boy doesn’t have an ounce of fat anywhere. This includes his muscles and arteries. There is nothing clogging anything.”

“Maybe he was injected with air,” Shorty jumped in.

“What?” Angela asked, but Bob only stared.

“You know, like in those criminal investigation shows.” Shorty walked closer to the duo while avoiding a glance at the corpse. “The victim gets

killed by an unknown substance, then it turns out to be air. Ta-da! We have a syringe bandit. I solved the case.”

“You mean to tell me, a fully grown werewolf is going to sit around and watch as someone injects him with air, doesn’t call anyone for help, and lies down to die?” Angela stated.

“Just because you don’t have a better theory, doesn’t mean you need to be salty now.” Shorty folded his hands over his chest and rocked his head back and forth.

“Now, who is being salty?” Angela fired back.

“Enough, you two.” Bob moved in front of them. “I’m not willing to discount anything at this point, even if it is wild. But don’t you go starting rumors of a syringe bandit with the troops.”

“I’m right,” said Shorty. “I can feel it.”

“Great.” Angela pursed her lips. “Now we are using intuition as investigation.”

“Hey, you use magic as part of your research and I don’t judge,” Shorty argued back.

“Ummmm.”

Bob looked around the morgue. “What was that?”

“TJ probably snoring,” answered Angela.

“TJ?” Shorty inspected the room as well. “Where is he?”

“Sleeping in one of the freezers.” Angela waved her hand at the far corner. “It’s been a couple of long days, so we’ve been taking turns napping here.”

“What?” Bob shouted.

Shorty slapped his head. “Now I know you have lost your mind.”

Bob rushed toward the freezer and opened the row in the middle until he found TJ. The young man was passed out, wrapped with a light blanket inside the bed.

“Hell no,” said Bob. “That’s it. You two are heading upstairs and sleeping.”

Bob pulled the bed out and woke up TJ with a gentle shake.

“Is it time to work?” TJ mumbled.

“No, child,” answered Bob, slowly dragging him out of the freezer. “It’s time for you to go to bed.”

“But we have so much work to do,” whined Angela.

“If you are napping, inside the freezers, it is officially past time to work,” Bob informed her. “You two are heading to the dorms upstairs to bed. Where is Triplet-3? Please tell me he is not in one of the others?”

“Come on Doc,” Shorty moved behind the doctor. “Let’s take this blood bath off.”

“No, he left early this morning,” Angela told him with her head down. “Pete yelled at him for going over his time. TJ is technically part of the medical staff, and Pete doesn’t have jurisdiction on him.”

“Well, that’s going to change,” Shorty informed her, as he helped her to take the dirty gloves off.

“But we can’t leave all bodies on the table,” Angela protested.

“Don’t worry, Doctor. They will be in the morgue when you wake up,” Bob assured her. “Shorty and I will take care of them.”

“We will?” Shorty snapped his head in his direction.

Bob glared. “Of course, we will.”

“Shorty, please escort TJ and the Doctor to their new rooms for the day.”

“My pleasure.”

“Make sure to get back here when you are done,” Bob reminded him. “We need to put bodies away.”

Shorty struggled to get the taller man to move without tripping, while the doctor whined that she wasn’t sleepy. Bob ran his hand through his hair. He was going to have to pay more attention to the medical staff. They were burning themselves out, hoping to serve. He glanced around the room, wondering if he should inspect the rest of the freezers just to make sure nobody else was taking a siesta in there.

Chapter Six



Nikita analyzed her card one more time. Her opponent was a serious Uno player, and she intended to destroy him before the night was over. Billy took a sip of his beer and smiled at her.

“I’m going to win this hand,” he insisted.

“You better, because you are running out of clothes, dear,” she teased.

“I can’t believe you talked me into playing strip-Uno in the middle of the park with just us two.”

“Were you interested in bringing more people to this party?” Nikita asked.

“That could be fun, but I’d rather not share on my first night.” Billy winked and took a sip from his drink.

Nikita finished her drink and placed the empty cup next to the cards. Billy cracked his neck and slowly rubbed his hands over his arms. The night had turned cooler, and Billy’s nipples were feeling the effect of the weather. Nikita smirked.

“You make it sound like we are in the middle of Spring Lake Park.” Nikita pointed to their deserted location. “We are in a secluded corner of Bringle. Besides, you are the one who said you didn’t want to be too far away from the college.”

“I thought you wanted to go for a night stroll.” He glanced behind him towards the still lake. “Besides, I heard there were crocodiles in these waters.”

Nikita looked over his shoulder, then back at the young man. Billy was in his mid-twenties, with dirty-blond hair and a goatee. He was originally from the Midwest, but his family moved down as soon as Haven was fully operational. His parents had agreed to let him stay at home as long as he was going to college. Billy had changed his major five times and started his third English comp class. Nikita met him at the college library, where he was doing his work-study.

“Maybe if you spent more time studying and less time chasing girls, you would be done with the degree?” Nikita had told him when they first met.

Billy ignored her inquiry and had asked her to several dates. The strip-Uno was their sixth date, and Nikita learned as much as she cared about him. He didn’t have any ambitions in life, besides the number of women he slept with. Something that made Nikita’s stomach turn. He played the role of sweet, respectable young man, but had at least four girls on the side. Each one giving him enough money to maintain his strange lifestyle.

The world would most likely not mourn Billy. At least once they found out what a lying-two-timing cheating asshole he was.

“Uno!” Nikita shouted, and Billy groaned.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, buttercup,” she gloated. “Pay up. Off with those socks.”

“Why the socks?”

Nikita stood speechless for a moment. “Would you rather lose the pants? You don’t have a lot of choices here.”

“It’s chilly here,” Billy whined. “At least the socks will keep my feet warm.”

“Your clothes.” Nikita made a gesture with her hands for him to hand over the pants.

Billy took a deep breath and shimmied out of his sweats. He was wearing black boxer shorts that reached way past his thighs. Nikita understood the decision. If he had been wearing briefs or even something smaller, he wouldn’t have been so eager to give up the pants.

Billy adjusted himself, giving Nikita a much better view of his package.

Nope, that was definitely not it. He just wanted to show off his friend to me. I really don’t feel bad now, Nikita told herself.

Billy was bigger than most average humans when it came to the family jewels. But Nikita had learned most shifters, especially werewolves were definitely gifted with that. Too bad so many were convinced that made them

God's gift to women. She hadn't met a single one that was worth saving. They all lied, cheated, or tried to get over the system.

"You like what you see?" Billy caught her staring at him.

"Just admiring the view."

"Good comeback," he teased her. "I might need to steal that line."

"Not a line, just the truth. Are you ready for another round?"

"Of course." Billy leaned over the cards and kissed Nikita softly on the lips. "I still have hopes of winning at least that top off you."

Nikita grinned. The only thing she had lost in the hour they had been playing was her shoes. She was still rocking her black mini skirt with a turtleneck. At least the shirt wasn't orange, or she would have given vibes of Velma from Scooby Doo. She left another red hood inside the Z for the night. At the rate she went through those hoods, she should buy stocks in them. But being overly paranoid was the reason she was still alive and safe. Another reason she never drove the same car to two dates in a row. She enjoyed blending in.

This evening, her mode of transportation was a white SUV. Texarkana had a plethora of SUVs all over the place. Nobody was turning their heads for hers. With a slight tint to the windows, people rarely paid attention to her. She couldn't say the same when she drove the Z.

"Your turn to shuffle." Nikita collected the cards and handed them over.

"How about one more drink before we start?"

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Nikita asked, raising an eyebrow. "You look pretty tipsy already."

"You are just afraid I will end up with whiskey-dick." Billy stared down at his penis. "Nope, he is still fully functioning."

"Whiskey-dick? That's a thing?"

Nikita debated if she wanted to see the culprit as well but held back the demand.

"Of course." Billy laughed. "Happens more often than not. Granted, this time it would be rum-dick."

"That would be so disappointing after working this hard to get you naked."

She poured herself another drink.

"I can prove I'm fine." Billy jumped to his feet but stumbled once.

"Oh Lord, what do you have in mind?"

"I'm going to perform the sobriety test."

“Right here?”

“No silly,” answered Billy. “Off the blanket.”

Billy rushed to the edge of the blanket near the lake. Nikita stared, confused, as the young man raised one leg to start his balancing act. His right foot was less than six inches off the ground when he wobbled. Nikita reached out a hand on instinct to help, but it was too late. He lost his balance and fell backwards. His head hit one rock at the edge of the water and Billy rolled into the lake. Before Nikita could process what was happening, Billy was face down in the lake, sinking away.

Nikita crossed her hands over her chest and just stared as the body disappeared under the calm current.

“Well, that was anti-climactic.” She frowned. “Hours of preparation and the fucker kills himself with a rock. Can I claim that as a kill? Nah.”

Shaking her head at the bizarre turn of events. She dumped the drinks, pulled the blanket up with everything else on it, and tossed it over her back. If the rock hadn’t finished him, she didn’t know how long it would take him to drown. She didn’t want to be around when Death stopped by to collect his soul.

Grabbing her shoes with her empty hand, she marched back to her vehicle. Taking a large plastic bag from the back seat, she dropped the bundle in her hand and shoes inside. She glanced one more time towards the lake, then climbed in. There was nothing left to do besides head back to her place.

“Guess I’m done for the night,” Nikita told herself as she pulled out of the lot.

Her phone rang, and she connected the call from the dashboard in the car.

“Mickey, two days in a row,” Nikita told him.

“Just letting you know the package has been mailed.”

“You are the best,” she replied sweetly.

“Also, giving you a heads up, Janet has been looking for you.” There was a pause on the other end. “She is offering a nice sum just for a photo of you. What’s going on?”

“I’m ready to move on and leave the guild,” Nikita replied.

“I told you not to get involved with that group.” The sound of typing came from Mickey’s end of the phone.

“But they pay really well,” Nikita added.

“Yes, but they don’t believe in free agents.” The typing stopped. “Once you join, they want you fully committed or dead. They can’t afford for people to know who they are or the people they work for.”

“Great.” Nikita tapped the steering wheel as she drove slowly towards her apartment. “You know I’m not a commitment type of girl.”

“Who are you telling?”

“If you are done with them, you will need to disappear,” Mickey confirmed her suspicions.

“I’m not done here . . .”

“You are running out of time,” Mickey interrupted. “They already found several of your aliases. How long would it take for them to find you in Haven?”

“I just need a few more days.” Nikita explained.

“I can help.” There was a pause on his side.

“What is that going to cost me?” Nikita finally broke the silence.

“Nothing outside your skills,” Mickey reassured her. “I have a family in Russia that needs some serious convincing.”

“A family?” Nikita made it a point to not kill kids or women. This deal could be hard to keep.

“Nobody outside your normal restrictions,” Mickey added quickly. “Three brothers.”

“When?”

“Before Thanksgiving.”

“Done. What’s your plan?”

“You are the best.” Mickey started typing again. “I can set up a hit and run with no survivors. Enough photos and blood type to convince even the pros.”

“Fine, but make it in New York City during Halloween,” Nikita added.

“Why?”

“They are sure I’m here in Haven, but I promised to head to Salem,” Nikita explained. “I need something totally different that would have them wondering what I was up to.”

“That’s a simple arrangement.”

Nikita smiled at herself as she scanned the rear-view mirror. She needed to be extra careful now that she knew she was being hunted. But Mickey’s aid would cause the distraction she needed to be out of Texas in time.

“I’ll contact you when it’s done and transportation information,” Mickey added.

“Sounds great,” Nikita replied. “Send me the details of the brothers. I might as well start the research while I’m here.”

“You won’t be disappointed.”

Nikita was sure she was going to be disappointed. International assignments never went as planned. It didn’t help that Russia was one of the hardest places to conduct a clean operation. So many spies did business there. Everyone was paranoid.

“Let’s hope they are not government officials. I might seriously be dead,” Nikita told herself. “Guess it will be an early night for me.”

The clock in the SUV read nine thirty-seven. She drove in silence back to her apartment, contemplating her options, and looking for a way to make the guild’s lives a living hell. She had made a deal with their leadership that she would maintain her independence. It seems the message was not passed down to all the underlings.

“A disappointing way to end a partnership.”

Chapter Seven



Bob sipped his Texarkana Blend brew as he climbed the stairs to his office on the second floor of the Station. He enjoyed starting his day with at least an hour of peace and solitude before the madness of running a supernatural community took over. The sun was barely out by the time he made it in, and the court didn't start for another hour. He smiled to himself as he opened the door to his office at the top of the building.

The second floor, more accurately the third if you counted from street level, was the quietest part of the building if that was even possible. Nobody else wanted to climb all the stairs to get to the top. Isis, Bartholomew, Constantine, Shorty, and himself were the only ones with offices up there, and Abby, Bob's secretary.

"Boss, I'm so glad I caught you." TJ rushed into the room.

"Caught me?" Bob turned to face the disheveled young man. "Good morning, TJ. Why should you be tracking me down so early in the morning?"

"I know how crazy Mondays are around here," TJ clarified. "I figured if I didn't get a hold of you early, I might never see you all day."

"You do have a point." Bob leaned against his desk, drinking his coffee. While he enjoyed making his own blend, the Texarkana Blend from Taste and See was still his top second. He made a mental note to himself to make a trip and grab a few more bags.

TJ shifted back and forth, looking over his small green notebook. Bob had required all the team to carry notebooks with them anytime they were

in the field. It was reassuring when they used them.

“Okay boss, you said to always let you know whenever we had a death in Haven,” TJ started his report. “This morning, we pulled a drowned victim from Bringle Lake.”

Bob froze in place with his coffee halfway to his mouth. Placing the cup on the table he stood, and really inspected TJ. His hair was messy, but he was wearing coveralls at least two sizes too big for him, instead of his cargo pants or scrubs uniform.

“We have a drowned victim?”

TJ nodded.

“How old?”

“Mid-twenties,” TJ replied, checking his notes. “He was going to the A&M right across the street. We found a couple of bottles of rum near the water.”

“This is horrible.” Bob examined TJ again. “Were you in the water?”

TJ looked down at his clothes and rubbed his head. “Yeah. I really need to bring more clothes to work.”

Bob shook his head. “TJ, we have an entire quartermaster in the building that his sole purpose is to requisition gear, uniforms, and food for the team. Before heading back to the hospital area, stop by and order yourself two weeks of uniforms. Make sure to get extra scrubs, street wear, and full water gear.”

“We have water gear?” TJ’s eyes widened.

“Please tell me you didn’t get in the water with your pants and shoes?”

“No.” He shook his head but didn’t meet Bob’s eyes. “I took my shoes off before getting in.”

Bob just blinked at the young man. “This is your first week alone, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

Letting out a deep breath, Bob rubbed his face. “I know the medical staff is very short handed now. You are splitting shifts with Cory, right?”

“No boss. It’s just the Doc and I on the staff,” TJ replied softly.

“What?” Bob shouted.

Footsteps were heard from outside Bob’s door as Shorty and Abby, a young lady with long red curls, ran into the room. Shorty had cargo pants with a black turtleneck on. Abby, on the other hand, had a long red dress, giving her a Shirley Temple vibe.

“Thank God you are early,” Shorty said as he stopped in front of the desk.

“Boss,” Abby said, carrying a stack of papers. “How did you get past me? I was watching out for you.”

“Abby, you really don’t have to beat me here,” Bob informed her, probably for the tenth time. “You don’t start till eight.”

“I would seriously make for a horrible secretary if I’m never here when you get in,” she mumbled. Her bangs covered most of her eyes when she spoke.

Bob shook his head, but Abby’s sweetness made him smile. He hated the idea of having a secretary, but Isis had made him. With the amount of paperwork that took place at the Station, Bob was getting behind. Abby had been a godsend. Her typing abilities were superior to anyone at the Station, except Bartholomew’s, not to mention her organizational skills were exceptional.

“Fine, but we will adjust your schedule,” he conceded.

Abby looked up, big brown eyes sparkling with joy. “Thanks, boss. I really like being here. It’s pretty boring in my loft.”

“Abby, you need a life,” Shorty announced from behind her.

“I have a life,” Abby muttered. “I’m a runner. Last month, I even joined the local club.”

“We really need to work on your definition of life.”

“Shorty, enough,” said Bob, stopping the teasing before it escalated to Abby blushing for hours. “Can we get back to work? TJ, explain to me why there are only two of you on the medical staff?”

TJ pursed his lips and glanced between Bob and Shorty. The silence dragged on as Bob waited, but TJ didn’t answer. Shorty dropped his head back and took a deep breath.

“Fine, I’ll say it,” Shorty waved his hands in the air.

“What is going on?” Bob asked.

Abby backed away from the room but stood on the threshold in case she was needed.

“Nobody wants to work with Angela because she has become a bitter, evil witch,” Shorty informed his old friend.

“What?” Bob stared at everyone in the room.

TJ slowly nodded in agreement. Abby covered her mouth in shock. Shorty just shrugged.

“One of you better explain,” ordered Bob.

“I haven’t been here long enough, boss,” TJ defended himself. “I really don’t know what’s going on. The doctor is under a lot of pressure and at times she is pretty short.”

“‘Short’ my ass,” Shorty jumped in. “She is bitter because that goofball George dumped her for the hot nurse, and they ran away to Fiji.”

Bob raised his hands while he blinked slowly to clear his thoughts. He took his coffee and drank a very long sip from the cup before speaking. “That’s not what I was told.”

“You made it a big deal that you did not want to hear gossip, especially the personal type,” Shorty clarified. “We were avoiding details.”

“Change of rule,” Bob told them. “I need to know the crazy details that could create a hostile work environment at the Station.”

“Got it.” Shorty beamed. “Wait till I tell you what’s been going on.” Shorty rubbed his hands together and laughed.

“Not all at once or right now.” Bob pointed at Shorty, who was ready to unleash months of gossip on the poor guy. “Back to the medical staff. Everyone is gone?”

“Yes.” TJ answered.

“Great.” Bob finished his coffee in one long gulp. “This is going to be a three cups of coffee kind of day.”

“I’m on it,” Abby shouted from the door and ran towards her area and where the third espresso machine was located.

TJ smiled as he followed the young woman’s movements with his eyes.

“You know,” Shorty moved closer to TJ. “She is single and is new in town. She could use a nice young man to show her around.” He leaned closer and whispered. “She doesn’t even have a car. She did share one with some *pyscho* roomie she had, but the girl left her stranded.”

Bob snapped his fingers in front of Shorty. TJ blushed. “Don’t be playing Cupid again. If I remember correctly, it was your idea to hook up Angela and George together.”

“Oh, no.” Shorty backed away towards the door. “You can’t blame that mess on me.”

“I’m just saying,” Bob continued. “Angela did not have any issues until you started meddling in her life.”

“Boss.” Abby shuffled into the room, holding an extra-large mug of dark espresso for Bob. “Here you go.”

“Thank you, Abby, you are a saint.” Bob took the cup from the young woman but held to her arm. “Abby, what happened to your arm?”

Abby looked down and tried to pull away. “It’s nothing.”

Shorty and TJ both walked closer to inspect the bruise covering most of the inside of her forearm.

“Girl,” Shorty jumped in. “If you were seeing someone, I would have put money they were beating you. Are you seeing someone? Cause I’ll take a trip over right now and show him how he needs to be treating a lady. Or is it a she? In that case, we will get Isis to put her ass in place.”

Abby swallowed hard and shook her head furiously, making her long red hair bounce from side to side. “I’m not seeing anyone. Nobody is beating me. I just . . .”

“Abby, what are you not telling us?” Bob urged in a softer voice.

“It’s embarrassing,” she admitted.

“Not more than looking like a Piñata,” Shorty informed her.

“I can’t remember,” Abby finally told them.

“How?” Bob asked.

“Are you on drugs?” Shorty prodded.

“Gods, no.” Abby backed away from the group rubbing her arms. “I just get random bruises.”

“What do you mean by random?” asked Bob, walking closer to her.

“I have tendency of just waking up with bruises, nothing major,” Abby struggled to explained.

“How long has that been going on?” Shorty asked, raising an eyebrow at Abby who’d started to sweat.

Abby dropped her head. “Ever since the doctor put me on Ambien. I used to flip between horrible insomnia or crazy nightmares. I really wasn’t coping well.”

“What kind of nightmares?” Shorty asked.

“Nothing I’m telling you,” Abby pointed a finger at the smaller man. “Let’s just say I’m grateful the Ambien knocks me out.”

“That’s it!” TJ shouted, making everyone jump.

“What’s it?” Shorty asked, glancing at the young man, confused.

“It’s the Ambien,” TJ explained, rushing to Abby’s side. “Have you ever woken up some place different than your bed?”

“Nooo,” replied Abby slowly backing away from TJ.

“I’m sorry Abby, not trying to scare you, I promise.” TJ raised both of his hands in a calming gesture.

“I don’t know about scaring her, but we are now all confused,” Shorty added.

“Are you saying the Ambien is causing her to bruise like this?” Bob tried to clarify.

“Not the bruising, but is probably causing her to sleepwalk,” TJ explained.

“Seriously?” Shorty asked.

“In some people, Ambien is too strong and can cause some serious side effects,” TJ continued in his most professional medical voice. “One of my neighbors broke her arm in the bathroom because she was sleepwalking and tripped. Not the first time she has been hurt.”

“Ouch,” said Bob, eyes wide.

“Jesus,” added Shorty. “We can’t be having Abby sleepwalking. She lives alone on a second floor. She could walk off the balcony.”

“No!” Abby covered her face. “I don’t want to die, but I have horrible insomnia. The Ambien is the only reason I can function each day.”

“It doesn’t sound safe,” Bob informed her. “Is there anything else out there?”

“Have you ever tried Lunesta?” TJ asked softly.

Abby shook her head, with tears ready to roll down her face.

“It’s a softer version of Ambien but also prescription based,” TJ explained. “Many people that have adverse side effects with Ambien have switched over and have seen significant results.”

“Brilliant plan,” said Shorty.

“How would you feel about switching?” Bob asked Abby.

“As long as I can still sleep,” she said meekly.

“I’m not sure how much sleeping you were really doing, or just being comatose,” Bob informed her. “As soon as Angela logs in, head to the basement, Abby, and ask for a new prescription.”

“I can explain it to the doctor when she walks down,” TJ volunteered.

“Perfect.” Bob clapped his hands together. “In the meantime, Abby, I need you to pull all the resumes and applications we have received for medical staff.”

“Am I looking for anything specific?” Abby asked, relieved the attention was away from her.

“Looking for paramedics, doctors, and even helpers,” Bob explained. “Anyone that has ever mentioned working with patients or a combat medic. At this point, we will take them all. Give all the files to Pete and let him know this is priority one. He will understand.”

“Yes, boss.” Abby nodded, hair bouncing around, and rushed out of the room.

“Let’s see if we can get you some help.” Bob turned to TJ. “Can you handle things for a couple of weeks alone?”

“We got this, boss,” he replied. “As long as we have no more weird deaths.”

“Yes, back to the body,” Bob reminded them of the purpose of the visit. “What happened?”

“One of the Naiads reported a body at the bottom of the lake.” TJ pulled out his pad again to report.

“Another dead body?” Shorty interrupted.

“Yes,” TJ said, flipping pages. “Young man. We found him wearing only boxers and socks.”

“Heart attack?” Bob furrowed his eyebrows.

“It doesn’t look like it. He had a nasty cut on his head,” TJ clarified. “But he was also a shifter.”

“Two dead shifters in two days?” Bob pondered. “I don’t like it.”

“It sounds like very different deaths,” Shorty stated.

“True, but I don’t believe in coincidences,” said Bob. “Not after working for the horsemen for this long. TJ, I need the full report. I’ll go inform the family this morning.”

“About that.” Shorty raised his hand.

“What’s the problem?” Bob faced his friend.

“That’s why I’m here so early. We have a line going around the corner,” Shorty explained.

“A line? Where?” Bob moved towards the window to glance outside.

“People waiting for court,” Shorty informed him. “Remember, we moved the waiting area inside? But it’s out the door.”

“I drove around and missed it,” Bob told them. “Is the spell holding up?”

With the increase of supernatural beings in the local area of Texarkana, the Union Station was getting a lot of visitors. The humans had neglected the Union Station building for years. Instead of renovating it and adding more attention, Virginia Black, Isis’s godmother, and the head of all the

witches, had placed a spell on the building and the surrounding areas. The spell concealed the true appearance of the building from humans, and even some of the supernatural beings.

“Pete is monitoring it, but we are reaching maximum capacity with all the people outside,” Shorty told him. “I came to see if we could start court earlier.”

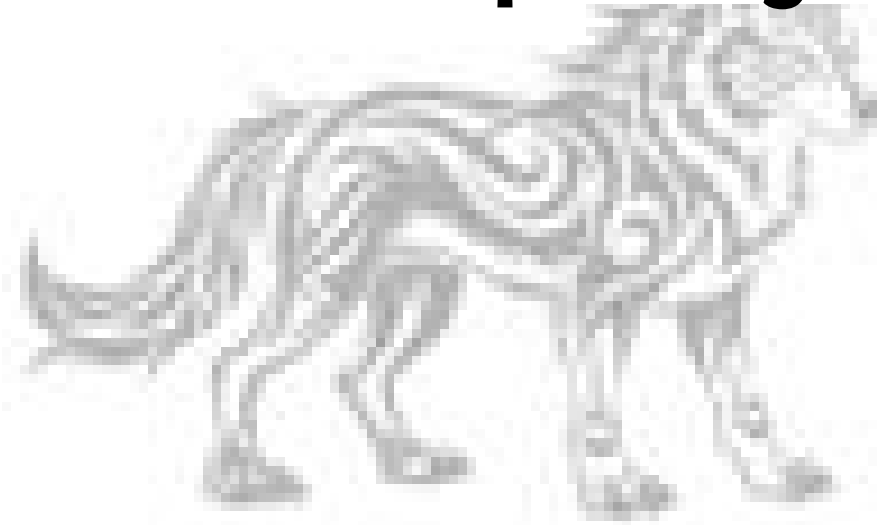
“It doesn’t sound like we have a lot of options,” Bob replied. “TJ, do me a favor. Once you have an ID from his prints, please contact Bartholomew. See if he can go and notify the family of the deceased.”

“Of course, boss.” TJ saluted.

“Thank you and don’t forget to remind Angela about Abby’s new prescription.” Bob patted TJ on the back. “Let’s go, Shorty. Bring me up to speed on all these cases.”

TJ ran out of the door. Bob took his coffee and followed Shorty out. Another day in the neighborhood.

Chapter Eight



Bartholomew eased the silver Lexus LFA in front of a one-family brick house on Myrtle Springs Road. Music blasted from the radio, but Bartholomew didn't pay any attention to it. His eyes were glued to the house, and his knuckles were white from holding tight to the steering wheel.

Unlike many guys his age, driving was not the peaceful or even exciting event they all enjoyed. At the time of his death, he didn't even have a driver's permit. He had a dirt bike that he enjoyed driving around the back roads, even if he was illegal. But the excitement of owning his first car never came. Once he became a Reaper, he gained the power to teleport to any location within a blink of an eye. That was exhilarating. Bending all the laws of gravity and reality had a way of making your blood flow like nothing else.

Isis still loved driving her Mini-Cooper around town. Everyone at Reapers had a vehicle, even Constantine, and he couldn't even drive. Bob had several trucks. With the way his vehicles had a tendency to explode, it had become a precaution for the team to have several trucks on standby. Bob stopped naming them. It was becoming morbid every time a new truck died a traumatic death, and they had to refer to the poor thing in the past tense.

Bartholomew unclenched his fingers slowly from the steering wheel and leaned his head back. The interior of Lexi was beautiful; black-and-red leather that glowed in the light. Lexi was the name he had picked for his

ride. It had become a whole family affair when he finally decided to get a car. Isis was thrilled and Constantine had too many recommendations for him to keep up with. Bartholomew went with a Lexus. He had stocks in Toyota who owned the brand, so investing in them made sense. Ever since he started making his own money at the age of nine, Constantine had insisted he started investing. Now it was a habit to purchase from the companies he already owned stocks from.

“Enough,” Bartholomew ordered himself. “Time to do the thing. Bob does it all the time. Even Isis can do it. This is part of your responsibilities.”

That was one of the new rules for Haven. The interns were the ones responsible for notifying families of the death of a loved one. If they weren’t available, one of the Reapers would step in. Not the fun part of the job, but a necessity. Every family needed closure in their lives. Bartholomew turned off Lexi and put on his tinted glasses.

Death had mentioned that as his powers grew, he could control the color of his eyes. In the last few years, he still hadn’t mastered the art. Isis never cared to hide her silver irises. Bartholomew had found the whole thing too time consuming. Instead, he designed a pair of tinted glasses that masked the color. A much easier solution to the problem.

Outside the vehicle, he glanced at his reflection in the driver's side mirror. Bob had insisted that they all had to be dressed appropriately for these occasions. Bartholomew had black slacks, and a button-down blue shirt. With the glasses in place, he probably could pass for an insurance agent or a bill collector. At least his hair was spunky, unlike the rest of his clothes.

He took another deep breath, then froze. The wave of energy hit him like a hot wind in the desert. Bartholomew stood straighter and scanned the area for the culprit. He recognized her signature anywhere. A quarter mile away at an intersection he found her running. Her strawberry-blonde hair tied in a ponytail bounced with each step. The distance made negligible difference to his enhanced vision. He could see every detail of her face, as if she was standing next to him. The energy rippled around her, and his breath stopped. He didn’t want to draw attention to himself, but it was too late. She had sensed him and stopped running.

Oh god. What should I do?

He was staring. Slowly, he raised a hand and waved. Faster and more graceful than he was, Magdalena waved back. He liked her full name better than her nickname, Maddie. Sweat ran down his back, even though the

weather was cool with a soft breeze. Bartholomew realized he hadn't lowered his hand and quickly dropped it. Magdalena grinned, and Bartholomew noticed her eyes shifting colors from a sky blue to her normal purple.

Impressive, he told himself, jealous.

She waved again and took off down the road. Glancing behind her once, she leaped, and Bartholomew's mouth dropped. In less than three heartbeats, she had shifted. The athletic built young lady with the perfect complexion was now a dragon. Bartholomew glanced around the place, making sure nobody else had seen the shift, but the area was deserted. Fortunately for everyone, Magdalena was still considered a baby in dragon years. Pretty small that she could go unnoticed, even by human standards.

Bartholomew was also sure she had shifted just to show off.

"Mission accomplished," Bartholomew said to the wind. "You are impressive." He watched her for several minutes before she disappeared into the sky.

It took him another several minutes to realize his heart rate had increased, and that his pants were now featuring a very distinct bulge.

"Damn! This is not good."

Bartholomew adjusted his pants, and even bounced up and down several times, but nothing helped.

"Bad news, dead kid, depressed parents."

That did it. The reason for being in front of this house hit him, and everything, including his erection, dropped to the sole of his feet. Gorgeous girls were only a momentary distraction. He had a job to do, and this family deserved his full attention.

Focusing on his duty, he walked towards the door. Taking long deep breaths, Bartholomew rang the doorbell. It took a few long minutes before the door was opened. A young man, maybe in his late twenties with black hair, medium build, and under six feet tall, was standing in front of Bartholomew.

"Good morning," said Bartholomew. "Is this the Leary residence?"

"It is. How can I help you, Reaper?" the young man replied.

"Have we met?"

"No, we haven't," the young man told him. "But everyone in Haven knows who the Reapers are."

“So, basically, my glasses are not fooling anyone?” Bartholomew took off the glasses and placed them in his front pocket.

“No, they weren’t, but they definitely minimize the intensity of your stare.” The young man couldn’t make eye contact with Bartholomew.

“In that case, I’ll keep them on.” Without waiting for a reply, Bartholomew placed the glasses back on his face and the young man visibly relaxed.

“Thank you,” said the young man.

“Bartholomew.” He extended his hand to the young man.

“Scott.” He shook hands with Bartholomew.

“Can I come in?” Bartholomew asked.

“This can’t be good. Please.”

Scott moved out of the doorway and escorted Bartholomew inside. It was a modest living room, even though the house was in the more affluent part of town. The house was clean, but the furniture was definitely old. Bartholomew took a seat on the loveseat and waited for his host to do the same.

“Are your parents in?” Bartholomew finally asked.

“Father is dead, and mother is working.”

“Does anyone else live with you guys?” Bartholomew asked softly, calming his own nerves.

“My younger sister, she is a sophomore at PG high,” Scott replied. “Our brother Billy is at Texas A&M, but he stays in the dorm. What is this about?”

“I’m so sorry to inform you, but we found the body of your brother at Bringle lake,” Bartholomew informed him.

Scott stood still. Bartholomew could read the dozens of emotions flashing on his face but held his breath. He waited for the young man to gather his thoughts.

“How?” Scott finally asked.

“We are not sure,” Bartholomew admitted. “We would like to request permission to do an autopsy on the body.”

Scott nodded, but his eyes were glassy with unshed tears. “My mother is going to die.”

“I’m really sorry for your loss.”

“Billy was the favorite,” Scott spoke like he never heard Bartholomew speak. “Mom had placed all her hopes on him. He was the good one in the

family. After dad died, she sold everything to give us a better life here. She feared for us.”

“Why?”

“Mom is human. Dad was a were,” Scott explained. “When he died, she took it really hard. His pack had issues with him marrying someone outside the species, but he didn’t care. Once he was gone, there wasn’t any protection.”

“That sounds awful,” Bartholomew added, not sure what else to say.

“I wasn’t much help.” Scott dropped his head. “All I ever wanted to do was to be part of the pack. But they wanted me to choose between them and my mom. I couldn’t. Things happened.”

“Do you need me to come back and tell your mother?” Bartholomew sat still.

“No, I can do it.” Scott stood and paced the room. “I just don’t know what we are going to do. When dad died, mom was in shock for weeks. I have a record and getting work here is hard. She barely got a job working in the kitchen at the school system. I enrolled in the nursing program at the college, but I still have at least a year and an internship before I qualify for anything.”

“Did you say nursing program?” Bartholomew interrupted Scott.

“Yeah, but I’m far from being done.” Scott stopped pacing.

“It really doesn’t matter.” Bartholomew stood to face the young man. “While having a degree pays more, and I would recommend finishing it, I know we are always looking for help in our hospital at the Station. Well, more like the morgue and it would be night shift.”

“Seriously?”

“It takes a special kind of skill to work with the supernatural community,” Bartholomew explained. “It helps if you are part of it. Besides, we pay really well. Our benefits would cover your mother and your sister. Also, we can cover the burial for your brother.”

“Please tell me you are not feeling sorry for us.” Scott squeezed his fingers together.

“My parents died when I was only five. The last thing my mother did before she passed was beg Death to take care of me. I can’t remember much of that day, but she made an impression on Death who took me in as her ward.” Bartholomew stood straighter and focused all his intensity on Scott. “The loss of a loved one is something I take seriously. I know the soul of

your bother was well taken care of by Death herself and has transitioned to their next destination. But I do not offer you a job out of pity.”

Scott took a step back from Bartholomew’s power that radiated through the whole room.

“The one responsible for the hiring is Pete,” Bartholomew continued. “You can stop by the Station and ask for an application. If you are qualified, you have the job.”

“Pete? Does he have a last name?”

“Pete the Pixie does not need a last name.” Bartholomew chuckled. “Trust me, everyone knows who he is. You also should not have a problem qualifying. Last time I checked, nobody wants to work the night shift in the EMT department. Crazy things happen in Haven at night.”

“I’ll take it.” Scott’s eyes held a desperate measure to them. “If I can at least give some good news to my mother, I’ll scrub toilets if that’s available.”

“That crew is definitely filled,” Bartholomew informed him. “But I’m sure we have work.”

“When can I stop by?”

“Anytime.”

“Thank you.” Scott extended his hand. “Nobody has been willing to help without asking for something in return. The world has become a cruel place.”

“Not everyone,” Bartholomew replied. “Let Pete know I sent you. Please give my condolences to your mother. She can call the Station whenever she is ready to see your brother.”

“Will do.”

Scott escorted Bartholomew to the door. They shook hands one last time. Bartholomew marched towards Lexi as Scott shut the door. This was not his favorite thing to do, but if he could help this family, it wasn’t a total waste.

He climbed in, started the sports car, and dropped his head. The digital clock on the dash read eight thirty.

“It’s not even nine,” Bartholomew told himself. “From now on, we are not delivering bad news before noon.”

Grabbing his cell phone from the dashboard, he pressed the speed dial for TJ. The call barely rang when TJ answered.

“How did it go?”

“That was the worst thing anyone should ever do,” Bartholomew replied.

“That’s why you get paid the big bucks,” TJ informed him.

“Nobody gets paid for this part,” Bartholomew fired back. “But at least something good came out of it. Do you still need help in the morgue?”

“Are you kidding me? We are dying. No pun intended.”

Bartholomew smirked, knowing his friend would never make a reference like that as a joke.

“Well, you are in luck,” Bartholomew informed him. “The brother of the deceased is actually studying to be a nurse. Might have a slight record with the humans but could be a great fit.”

“At this point, I’ll take the boat-man if he wanted a job,” said TJ.

“You actually want DJ Bag-of-bones to work in the morgue with you?” Bartholomew was very familiar with the boat-man. He was the reason humans thought Death looked like a giant skeleton with a hood. The being was terrifying, with a great sense of music, but still not one to mess with.

“If he can work, I won’t hate.” It was official. Bartholomew knew it. TJ was desperate.

“In that case, keep an eye out for Scott Leary,” Bartholomew said, but didn’t disconnect the call as it was a typical Reapers custom.

The silence dragged, and finally TJ spoke. “Okay, what’s bothering you?”

“What?”

“We are sitting on the phone not saying a thing,” TJ pointed out. “What happened? I know it couldn’t have been that bad.”

“I saw her,” Bartholomew blurted out.

“Saw who?”

“Who else? The most gorgeous girl I know with the enchanting purple eyes.”

“Ahh, you saw Goldilocks again.” TJ laughed from the other side. “Where?”

“Down the street from the victim’s house.” Bartholomew glanced at the rear-view mirror just in case Magdalena was back running.

“Are you still there?” TJ asked cautiously. “Please drive away now before you look like a stalker.”

“Damn, you are so right.” Bartholomew sat up, put the car in drive, and took off.

“Good. Now tell me, what did she say?”

“Nothing.” Bartholomew glared at the dashboard with his best friend’s name. “She was like blocks away. I waved.”

“You saw a girl blocks away and you are sure it was her?”

“Please, of course, I’m sure. I’m a Reaper.” Bartholomew rolled his eyes.

“Did she see you or do anything?”

“She waved back.”

“Did she recognize you?” TJ pressed the conversation, then stopped himself. “What am I asking? Never mind. If you have better eyesight than me, and I’m a shifter. That girl could probably see the moles on your ass from a mile away being a dragon.”

“That is a very traumatizing thought, thanks.”

“My pleasure.” TJ laughed from his end. “When are you going to ask her out?”

“Me?” Bartholomew took a hard right turn and almost lost control of the car. “When are you going to ask Abby for coffee?”

“Why are you turning this around on me?”

“Exactly!” Bartholomew stuck his tongue out at the dashboard. Not the most mature thing to do, but he didn’t care. It wasn’t like TJ was watching him. “When you stop stuttering every time Abby is around, then I can build the nerve to ask Magdalena out. Besides, it’s not like I see her all the time.”

“Didn’t you tell me Death knows where she lives?”

“Yes, but she is like an infant to her family.” Bartholomew tried to defend himself. “How would they like if some strange guy stopped by their house to ask her out?”

“If I’m not mistaken, dragons consider their offspring kids for like a hundred years,” TJ added. “Are you seriously planning to wait that long to ask? I know you two are almost immortal, but I will be long dead before you go on your first date.”

“I really hate you.”

“Whatever! Don’t make me get your sister involved.”

Bartholomew’s mouth dropped. “Ouch! Low blow. Here I was going to invite you to lunch.”

“I’m in. But I don’t get my first check till Friday, so you are paying,” TJ informed him. “And this is not a replacement for a date. See you back at the Station.”

TJ disconnected the call, and Bartholomew frowned. He was normally the one that disconnected first. He was losing his touch. Taking long breaths, he focused on driving.

Please don't be crazy or a criminal, Bartholomew pleaded. He really wasn't interested in taking Eric's mantra of dating the crazy girls. He really was hoping for a nice one. But who was he kidding? He knew Magdalena was super-hot and had the inclinations of a drunken Loki for causing trouble. This was a bad idea.

Chapter Nine



“**Y**ou good for nothing, germ-infested ho!”

The shout came from somewhere in the back of the large assembly room that doubled as the judicial chamber at Union Station. The place could easily hold over two hundred people in neatly organized chairs. That was if those were the size of humans. In a room full of supernatural, the limitation on bodies varied. With the family of trolls, two clans of shifters all the size of professional football players, and twenty witches, the place felt crowded.

“Burn her ass!” someone else shouted back.

Bob and Shorty sat behind the judges' bench at the back of the room, watching the new Jerry Springer show unfolding in their midst. Shorty leaned over towards Bob, who was holding his face with both hands.

“Do you think we are paying for some sins we committed in our other lives?” Shorty whispered.

“What other lives?” Bob replied. “We are paying for the hours we made fun of all those dysfunctional families that went on TV to air their dirty laundry. We are there now.”

“Oh, yeah.” Shorty nodded in agreement. “I forgot about that. This is only fitting.”

“Bitch!” Bob did not know who shouted that for the tenth time.

A shoe went flying and Bob only closed his eyes. It was the beginning of the end. Witches took sides and spells were summoned.

“This is going to end badly for everyone,” Shorty announced and sat back and tapped the bench like a drum roll.

Bob shook his head, and using the microphone on the podium, announced, “I would recommend not doing magic in the courtroom.”

Nobody listened. Trolls dove to one side to avoid being hit, while shifters all started to transform. Instead of the explosion, chaos, and panic that a magical attack should have created, a torrent of water dropped onto the groups. The security team on the edge all popped open their umbrellas and waited as far from the flood as possible. Alarms followed the small hurricane, and three squads of fully armed pixie SWAT busted in on the scene.

Screams overtook the crowd.

“Everyone on the ground or you will be pixied,” a loud voice announced from the intercom.

“We will resume court after lunch,” Bob announced and stood from the bench, completely dry.

He left the court and the screaming attendees to be handled by his team. Shorty followed behind, humming along. The passageway behind the court was mercifully quiet. Bob leaned against a wall and waited.

“What are we missing?” he asked Shorty.

“Are you asking why everyone is losing their minds?”

“Yes!” Bob was running his hands through his hair, making it stand up in a mess.

“Life is happening, boys,” Constantine said from behind them.

“Boss, I didn’t you know were here,” Bob told the feline as he turned around.

Constantine seldom made appearances at the Station. If Death was feared, Constantine was worshipped in some circles. Something that made the feline very uncomfortable. He wasn’t shy, if anything, nobody would ever deny Constantine wasn’t vain. But constant nagging put even the self-proclaimed extraordinaire on edge.

“The new drones that Bartholomew ordered me just arrived, but they were delivered here,” Constantine explained. “Instead of having them moved, I stopped by. The Triplets were at Reapers and gave me a ride.”

“Can you explain what is happening?” Bob asked.

“Too many alphas wanting to be in charge,” Constantine said calmly. “Haven is a brand-new thing, so everyone is migrating to claim a piece of

the pie.”

“But aren’t we in charge?” Shorty asked, looking between Bob and back at the cat.

“Are we?” Constantine teased.

“If we are, it doesn’t feel like it,” said Bob.

“I know you all want to be nice and liked,” Constantine continued. “But you will need to set a new order in the community. Everyone needs to know that crime, vandalism, and madness will not be tolerated. In a way, they should fear you more than each other.”

“This is what Isis was trying to avoid,” Bob said.

“Maybe.” Constantine strolled down the passageway. Bob and Shorty followed closely behind. “Isis wanted to have a place that everyone felt safe. Now you have clans competing for dominance and terrain. Whatever you decide to do, you better do it fast.”

“Fast, why?” Bob asked, as they entered the break room.

“With All Hallows-Eve right around the corner, the supernatural energy in the area is going to be at its peak,” Constantine explained. “The last thing we need is a magical war taking place during that time.”

“I really hate Halloween,” Shorty muttered.

One of the courtroom’s guards marched to their table. “Good morning, Mr. Constantine.”

“I love these guys.” Constantine pointed a paw at the young man in uniform.

“Boss, we have secured the courtroom again, and the team is draining the water. What should we do with all the attendees?” the young man asked.

“Reschedule that entire group for tomorrow,” Bob ordered. “Anyone gives you any lip or trouble, lock them in the dungeons.”

Shorty raised an eyebrow and Constantine nodded in approval with a smirk on his face. The guard glanced back at Bob, not sure if he understood.

“But, boss, what should we do if they try to disagree?”

“Nicolas, you have been supplied with enough ammo to tranquilize an elephant,” Bob reminded him. “I do not expect a single person or being to lay a hand on you or the team. If anyone gets wild with you, knock them out. Then carry their asses to the dungeon.”

“Yes, sir.” Nicolas saluted and took off at a run.

“Are you sure about this?” Shorty asked.

“Constantine is right,” Bob acknowledged. “We have been too nice for too long. How many fights did we have this morning alone?”

“Six,” Shorty confessed.

“We are the only ones getting hurt,” Bob added. “I’m not saying we go crazy and start hurting people, but we do need to show that they shouldn’t mess with us.”

Out of the corner of the room, a flash of sprinkles and light came straight at the group. Pixie dust hit everyone as Pete stopped in front of everyone. He was wearing a full tuxedo, the tails of the coat also floated behind him. Shorty cautiously reached up to touch the tails, but Pete slapped his hand away with his cane. Pete wasn’t even a foot long, but he had the presence of a six-foot-tall man.

“Please tell me it’s true, and you finally approved using full force on the masses?” Pete asked, floating inches from Bob’s face.

“Back up, Pete, and stop spreading dust everywhere,” Bob ordered.

“This is amazing!” Pete shouted with both hands raised in the air as he walked in circles around Bob’s head. “It’s about time we show people who is truly in charge. We can have the machine guns ready, as well as the rocket launchers.”

“What machine guns?” Bob took a hold of Pete by the coattails of his suit. “What are you talking about?”

“We are going to claim the city from the humans!” Pete shouted.

“Help us, God!” Shorty shouted. “The Pixie man has gone mad.”

“Now that’s not what I had in mind when I said show them who is in control,” Constantine told Bob. “A bit too drastic.”

“Pete, we are not declaring war on the humans or anyone else.” Bob stared at the pixie. “You have full authority to use whatever force is necessary to take control of the Station. We will start by enforcing harsher penalties to keep control in the community. But we are not going to war.”

“What about all the shifter clans trying to take over?” Pete asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Please send a message to all clans, packs, and anyone else interested in claiming a territory in Haven, or trying to show their signs of power, that they will need to plead their case in front of the Reaper and Constantine,” Bob announced.

“Wait, what?” Constantine muttered. “Why me and Isis?”

“Simple boss, those not afraid of Isis are terrified of you,” Bob clarified. “Everyone knows you do not get involved in the affairs of Haven. Maybe it’s time you do. If I’m the sheriff of this circus, you are about to be the mayor.”

“That is not what I had in mind,” Constantine corrected him as he dropped on his back paws.

“You are always the one reminding me I should take advantage of all my resources. We are doing it now.”

“I’m not a resource.” The cat glared.

“No, but you are the most powerful being next to Death.” Bob tapped his fingers on the table. “I’m not interested in a full-scale war. But scaring the crap out of a few arrogant beings, I’m in.”

“Who are you?” Shorty asked, leaning over the table. “What have you done with my Bob?”

“What are you talking about?” Bob asked.

“Where did this pity side come from?” Shorty asked.

“I really want to know the same thing,” Constantine agreed.

“This is more my liking,” Pete joined in, sitting on Bob’s shoulder.

“It’s call improvising,” Bob announced. “Pete, let the waiting crowd know I will resume court in ten minutes. Please warn them, if anyone gets out of line, this includes shouting or fighting, they will spend the next forty-eight hours in the dungeons.”

“I’m on it.” Pete flew from Bob’s shoulder, slammed his feet together, executed an about face in the air before flying away.

“Do we have enough open cells down there?” Shorty asked, more to himself.

“You might want to check, because they are about to get filled soon,” Bob told his friend.

“Damn!” Shorty jumped and ran out of the break area, looking for a guard.

“Are you sure about this?” Constantine asked, now that they were alone.

“I hope it works,” said Bob softly. “Thank you for coming, Boss, and playing along.”

“Your text sounded urgent,” Constantine admitted. “I did not want to diminish your authority here. But if you think my presence will help bring order, I don’t mind playing.”

“At this point in time, we need a show of force. What better than the infamous Constantine claiming Haven?”

“That is a crazy card, my boy.” Constantine patted Bob’s arm. “I like it.”

“Do you think the big-boss would mind?”

Constantine shook his head. “As long as we are not dragging Death to the center of this mess, they truly won’t care what we do. We just need to keep order and run a safe city.”

“Boss, here you are.” Abby rushed into the room, carrying a stack of folders. “Hi, Mr. Constantine.”

The girl forgot all about Bob and dropped to one knee to be eye level with Constantine, who had made himself comfortable on a table. She was scratching his ear before Bob could stop her.

“Mr. Constantine, you are the most handsome of all the cats,” she told him.

“I know, Abby, I know.”

Abby giggled in delight, and Bob dropped his head on the table.

“Are you hungry? I have homemade ice cream that I can bring you,” Abby told the feline, who was acting more like a regular cat than ever Bob had seen.

“Abby, did you have something for me?” Bob raised his hand to get her attention.

“Sorry, boss,” said Abby, struggling to pull away from the cat. “I think cats are adorable.”

“I thought you were allergic to cats?” Bob asked.

“Some species of feline, yes, but who can be allergic to Mr. Constantine?” Abby replied, offended.

“Do you have cats?” Bob continued his interrogation.

“No.” Abby’s face fell. “Most apartments I stay in don’t allow pets. I have always moved too often to drag the poor things around. But isn’t he precious?”

Bob shook his head one more time and pulled the folders from Abby. “How about if I take these?”

“Sure,” Abby muttered, not looking at her boss. “The dispatcher on duty brought them after you left for court. I heard over the intercom that you were on recess for lunch and figured you would like to review them, as you normally do.”

“Good call, Abby,” said Bob as he read over the subject for each report. “Missing shifter?”

“What?” Constantine asked.

“This report says the Rodriguez clan came to report a missing member.” Bob looked back at the cat. “Have you heard anything about this?”

“I haven’t,” Constantine replied. “But that clan is recruiting from the new arrivals into the city. No longer are clans and packs just family members. It’s going to be tough keeping all the last names that belong to each pack straight.”

“Is that important?” Abby asked, pulling herself away from Constantine.

“I’m not sure. I’m hoping it isn’t,” Bob answered, distracted. “A lot of kids go off into the woods to hunt when it’s close to a full moon.”

“Boss, the full moon was two weeks ago,” Abby informed him.

“Interesting.” Bob placed the folders on the table. “Abby, have the officer who took this report meet me in my office after court. I have a few questions for him.”

“Yes, boss.” Abby gave Constantine one more scratch. “Goodbye, Don Constantine.”

Abby gave the cat a very off salute and took off giggling. Bob stared at the usually composed young lady turned five-year-old kid.

“What did you do to my secretary?” Bob turned on his boss and friend.

“Don’t be jealous, old boy,” Constantine said, licking his paw to fix the fur on his head. “It’s not my fault that the girl has good taste. She is seriously the sweetest person in this building.”

“I’m questioning her judgment.” Bob stood from his chair as Shorty ran back into the break room.

“Okay, Bob,” Shorty announced. “We are all set.”

“For?”

“We can lock up roughly fifty people without violating the security spells,” said Shorty. “Try not to go too rough on this crowd ‘cause it will be bad.”

“Fine,” Bob told him. “Start keeping count of how many we lock up. Once we hit fifty, we stop court for the day.”

“Deal.”

Shorty gave Bob a fist bump, and the two walked back to their battle zone, leaving Constantine to lick himself in peace.

Chapter Ten



Bartholomew sat at his command post at Reapers, scanning camera feeds from all the different locations he had around Texarkana and even the ones that he hacked into. He wasn't looking for anything special, just checking the areas for anything unusual. For the past year, he'd made it part of his ritual just to monitor the cities at least once a week. This evening his mind was distracted, but he went through the motions.

"Why do you keep going to Myrtle Springs Road?" Constantine asked from the kitchen table.

"What?"

"You have roamed over the same area five times in the last ten minutes," Constantine pointed with his paw. "What are you looking for?"

It took Bartholomew just a second to realize he was scanning the area near the place where he saw Magdalena. He took a deep breath, searching for something to say.

"Nothing," he said softly. "A bit distracted. Guess my mind is still stuck with my condolences visit."

"It never gets easy," Constantine informed him. "But Pete told me Scott Leary stopped by already inquiring for a job. You made an impression."

"Good," said Bartholomew, changing the location on the screen. "Is Pete going to hire him?"

"We desperately need EMTs and paramedics," Constantine confessed. "Scott seems eager, has great grades. Pete is hoping to have him onboarded by next week."

“That would be great.” Bartholomew let the feed face Union Station. “Scott seems pretty worried his mother could lose her job over this.”

“He wasn’t wrong.” Constantine faced Bartholomew. “The death of a child is a pretty traumatic event for any parent. Recovering can take years. Some never do.”

“Well, I’m glad I could help with something.” Bartholomew stretched and glanced out of the glass window facing the inside of Reapers.

Bartholomew always enjoyed being able to look down at the training area on the first floor. It made the space not feel so lonely.

“Are you sure you are okay?” Constantine pushed.

Do I really want to confess I have a crush on the dragon?

Bartholomew didn’t have time to answer his debate when the door to the loft popped open. Bob rushed in carrying a large platter and two bags.

“That crazy girl sent pie,” Bob announced.

“Who sent pie?” Bartholomew asked, jumping up from his seat to help Bob.

“Abby!” Bob informed them. “She went home for lunch and baked him a pie.”

“Baked who a pie?” Bartholomew placed the two large bags Bob was carrying on the counter.

“Him.” Bob pointed at Constantine with his chin.

“Awe! I told you she was adorable.” Constantine leaped from the kitchen table to the island to inspect his pie. “What kind did I get?”

“Apple.”

“Nice, classic, but good,” Constantine said, inspecting the perfectly crafted dessert.

“How long does she get for lunch, that she had time to bake a pie?” Bartholomew asked, slapping Constantine’s paw before he could stick it in the pie.

“Hey, it’s my pie. I can pinch it if I want to,” complained Constantine.

“Not when we have plates, so stop that,” Bartholomew argued.

“She took a long lunch to surprise him.” Bob was standing with his hands on his hips. “How is that even fair? One day. Not even a day, a few hours, and she is just in love with him.”

“The girl has taste,” Constantine said proudly.

“Is she an undercover cat lady and we don’t even know it?” Bartholomew asked, taking notes for TJ. He should start shifting into a pussycat around

the Station.

“She doesn’t even have one. She just really likes them,” Bob explained.

“There is nothing wrong with cat ladies,” Constantine chimed in. “Did you know there is a series called *The Cat Lady* by a local author? She even features Texarkana. Her first book is called *The Cat Lady Special*. She goes from Cat Lady to arms dealer.”

“How many times have you read it?” Bartholomew asked, glancing over his shoulder at Constantine.

“None!”

“Probably half a dozen times,” Bob corrected. “Any book that has the word cat in the title he has read or has on his to be read pile. The fact that one takes place in Texarkana is a bonus.”

“Actually, she made up this town in Cass country to set the illegal operations,” Constantine clarified.

“You know a lot about a book you have never read,” Bartholomew teased.

“I’m just keeping up with the local artists, that’s all.” Constantine pulled a small piece of pie with a sharp claw and inhaled it. “This is good. Have you considered giving her a promotion?”

“I’m not giving anyone a promotion for baking. Except our chef, of course,” Bob told his boss.

“How about making her the employee of the quarter?”

“That is probably frowned upon, since it comes across as quid-pro-quo,” Bartholomew added. “I’m pretty sure that it’s illegal in most federal installations.”

“We don’t work for the feds,” said Constantine. “Why should I care? Besides, Abby really needs an on-the-spot cash award.”

“Would you give an award to anyone who baked you a pie?” Bob questioned his boss again.

Bartholomew cut three slices and handed one to each of his companions. Without waiting, he took a bite and moaned.

“God, this is delicious,” Bartholomew told them. “Yes! Give that woman a bonus or promotion. I’m totally in. Can she make us more pies?”

“See, Bartholomew agrees.” Constantine took a bite of the slice Bartholomew had placed in front of him.

“Go ahead, try it, Bob,” Bartholomew urged him. “It’s okay to know someone else can bake as good as you.”

“It can’t possibly be that good.” Reluctantly, he took a bite.

Bartholomew and Constantine waited in silence as Bob chewed. The intern tried to fight it, but eventually he gave in and dropped his fork on the table.

“How can this be so good?” he cried. “She has never even mentioned she likes to cook, and now she is baking like a Michelin Chef. How?”

“I really don’t care how, she just needs to send more,” said Bartholomew. “That’s it. Constantine, you need to visit the Station at least once a week. We need more pies.”

“I hate to admit it, but Bart is right,” Bob agreed with a mouth full. “We need more pies.”

“The sacrifices a cat must make for the team.”

The trio laughed as they enjoyed the flaky pastry. A light knock at the door stopped their chewing, and Death walked in.

“Do I get some of whatever you three are devouring?” she asked.

“Abby made Constantine a pie, and it’s finger-licking good,” Bartholomew informed her, using one of his favorite southern expressions.

“Because I’m amazing,” Constantine said as an explanation.

“Better than Bob’s?” Death glanced at her newest intern.

“I know when I’ve been beaten, and this is good.” Bob took a deep bow.

“You might need to save me a piece. We have work to do.”

The radiant energy left the room, and everyone focused their attention on Death.

“Why can we never have a boring day?” Constantine asked.

“Have you ever had a boring day in five thousand years?” Death asked him.

“Not after meeting you,” said Constantine with a smile. “What is the crisis?”

“I’m not sure if it’s a crisis, but it’s definitely odd.” Death leaned against the glass window. “I just picked up the soul of another shifter. This time in Ferguson Park.”

“I’m seriously thinking all the parks in Texarkana are haunted,” said Bartholomew, walking towards his workstation.

“I don’t know about haunted, but something weird is going on in Haven,” Death confessed.

“Was the soul okay?” Constantine asked.

“Besides the usual shock at being dead, yes.” Death started pacing around the loft. “That’s another mystery. These last three victims all seem to have a great time before they died.”

“That’s a great way to go,” Bartholomew told them from his computer. “Better than staring at your killer and waiting for them to cut your throat out.”

“Really?” Constantine glared. “Did we have to go there?”

“As the only member of this group that has technically been killed, I can go there!” Bartholomew shouted.

“Oh please,” Constantine said. “All of us here, well minus Death, have been very close to dying or badly injured. So, no more references to your own doom and gloom.”

“Have I overused my death card?”

“Yes!” everyone said in unison.

“Fine,” Bartholomew replied, but rolled his eyes at the group. “Let’s get back to your dead shifter. Where was he?”

“By the trail near the front of the park, but not the pond,” Death told him, walking over.

“Of course, he would die there.” Bartholomew clicked several buttons and shook his head.

“Let me guess,” Death told him. “No cameras.”

“Not a single one.”

“What else can you tell us from the souls?” Constantine asked before licking his plate clean of the pie.

“I have a feeling they weren’t alone before they died,” said Death. “Granted, souls are disoriented after their passing. These three didn’t even know they had died.”

“What are we investigating again?” Bob asked the obvious question.

“Three fairly healthy male shifters, all dying within days of each other all in Haven,” Death stated the situation. “Nothing of that is natural and I don’t like surprises. The last thing we need is a serial killer loose in Haven.”

“If we have a serial killer, they are good,” Bartholomew told them. “If it wasn’t because the deaths were so close in time, nobody would have thought twice about them.”

“That’s the part that I don’t like,” said Death. “If this is a person doing this, they went through a lot of trouble not to leave a clue on the scene, and yet leave enough questions by killing them so close together.”

“Don’t they say every serial killer wants to be caught?” Constantine added.

“I think that’s only on those weird TV shows you watch,” Death corrected him. “Whatever is going on, I need you all to figure it out and stop it.”

“Yes boss,” said Bob. “Let me call Shorty and have him meet us there with a crew. Should we be worried about civilians?”

“No, the location was pretty dark that I wouldn’t expect any humans stumbling on the body until tomorrow.”

“I’m sending a message to Ricky,” Bartholomew told them. “He is our guy in the Arkansas side police department. Just in case someone makes a call.”

“Good idea,” said Bob, busy on his own phone texting the Union Station team. “Are you coming with us, Death?”

“No.” Death shook her head and her eyes got glassy. “I have business across the globe this evening. I’ll stay in touch.”

Death didn’t wait for an answer, instead vanished from the loft.

“This is where you get it from, Bart.” Bob pointed to the empty spot recently vacated by Death. “It just runs in the family, disappearing in the middle of a conversation without saying goodbye.”

“Just think, she is much better,” Bartholomew informed him. “At least now she knocks before popping into a room. That used to scare the hell out of me every time it happened when I was little. It took Constantine to warn me when she was coming so I would stop screaming.”

“Nobody ever claimed Death was ever good with living kids,” Constantine defended his old-time friend. “But I agree. She is much better now.”

“Team is on their way,” Bob announced. “Are you joining us, boss?”

“Not this time,” Constantine replied. “I’m going to do some scanning of my own using the drones. Maybe I can find someone lurking around where they shouldn’t be.”

“Let’s hope we find something useful,” said Bob, eating the last piece of pie from his plate.

“I have my phone if you need us,” Bartholomew told Constantine, following behind Bob.

At least a mission would keep Bartholomew’s mind focused and not thinking about the dragon shifter. He knew Death was right and something

strange was happening in Haven. But Bartholomew really hoped it wasn't a serial killer. Those were just hard to catch.

Chapter Eleven



It was a quick drive from the Nash industrial park to Ferguson Park at the Four States Fairground. Common sense still prevailed in town, and most humans were home asleep by nine pm. With Red River Army Depot being one of the largest employers in the area, many local businesses provided services to them. That translated to a shift in Texarkana and the surrounding communities, with them adjusting their work schedules to match that of the army depot. Most people now worked Monday through Thursday, starting at six thirty and ending at five.

This left roads and especially public areas deserted at ten pm. A fact Bob did not mind at all. It gave his undercover team of transients a better view of the cities. Even the new supernatural beings that were moving to town quickly adjusted to the schedule. It wasn't a surprise when Bob pulled up to the park that the only people in sight were a few of his team hovering in corners pretending to be asleep or drunk.

"Nobody has questioned the increase of transients in the area?" Bob asked as he parked the truck.

"What?" Bartholomew asked from the passenger seat.

"Nothing really," Bob stated. "I guess after years of being homeless, it still bothers me how easily people dismiss us."

"Not everyone," Bartholomew said, staring out the window. "Texarkana has a really powerful community of caring people."

"But?"

“Yeah, there is always a but.” Bartholomew turned to face his older friend. “Nobody ever wants to be reminded that they are only a paycheck away from being there themselves. Times are tough, and many people are struggling.”

Bob smiled at the younger man and his anger slowly vanished. “When did you get so wise?”

“I learned from the best. Aren’t you and Constantine always looking for the good in people? Why change now?”

“You are right.” Bob opened his door and was grateful for his new family. Even more for the people, he could finally help with his new position. “Are you okay?”

Bartholomew hadn’t moved from his seat, staring at the moonless sky.

“I think so.” The sound was too soft for Bob to believe. “How do you ask a girl on a date?”

Bob stopped outside the truck and turned to give the young Reaper, who was squeezing his hands tightly together, his full attention.

“It depends on the girl,” Bob confessed. “Some girls like romance. Others prefer a more direct approach. From the women I have encountered in my life, they all want one thing.”

Bartholomew’s head snapped up and eyes were ready to pop out of his socket as he waited.

“Attention.” Bob rubbed his chin.

“That’s it?”

“Unfortunately, it’s not as easy as it sounds.”

“Doesn’t everyone want attention?” Bartholomew crossed his arms over his chest.

“Have I ever told you I was married before?”

Bartholomew’s mouth dropped open, and he could only shake his head.

“It was obviously a very long time ago,” Bob explained quickly. “I was a young E-4 in the Army and met this gorgeous medic. I was smitten, but I was also a dedicated soldier with promotion potential. She understood being a private and hoping to advance herself.”

Bob turned to stare at the sky for a few quiet moments. Bartholomew sat silently, waiting for his friend to go on. Slowly, Bob took a deep breath and rubbed his face with both of his hands.

“We had this horrible saying. If the Army wanted me to have a wife, they would have issued me one,” Bob stated. Bartholomew raised an eyebrow in

confusion. "I picked the Army over my marriage. I gave it my all every day. When I got home, I sat on the couch and drank or watched TV."

"What did your wife do?"

"We fought a lot," Bob confessed. "Eventually, she found someone that gave her the attention she needed. He probably didn't take her for granted."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Bob told him. "I hadn't thought about that in years, but it taught me a huge lesson. Sometimes it's easy to get a woman's attention, but it's harder to keep it. If you don't have the time to dedicate to another person, it's not fair to drag them down with you."

"Is that way you never married again?"

"One of the reasons," Bob confessed. "Then my life went to shit, and I had nothing to offer a good woman. I gave up. But this was not about me."

Bob turned his full focus on the young man, and Bartholomew bit his lip. He was back to squeezing his fingers, turning his knuckles white with the pressure.

"Next time you see her, ask her if she likes coffee or tea," Bob suggested, and Bartholomew stopped.

"Why?"

"Because then you can tell her you know this great coffee shop in town that makes the best and offer to get her one." Bob winked and Bartholomew's million-dollar smile crept up his face. "That way it's not technically a date and if she says no, nobody feels bad."

"Bob, you are a genius."

"I hear that a lot around here. We need to work on your standards." Bob smiled as he watched the young man dance on the seat. "Now, can we get to work on this dead body?"

"Right." Bartholomew bounced off his seat. "I almost forgot."

"I know." Bob slammed the door of the truck and headed toward the location Death mentioned. *Young love makes a man dumb and forgetful. We are not ready for a love-sick Reaper*, Bob told himself as they walked.

"What took you two so long?" Shorty asked as Bob and Bart approached the body.

"Traffic," Bob lied.

"Right," was the only thing Shorty said back.

"What do we have here?" Bob asked, tilting his head to one side.

Death hadn't explained the position of the body. Bob knew Death had seen humans die in all sorts of strange positions, so this was probably nothing new. But he wasn't sure what to think of the situation. It was a young man, arms stretched over his head, tied to a tree. That was not the part that disturbed Bob. The guy was naked.

"Can someone explain how you die with an erection?" Bob finally pointed at the elephant in the room.

Bartholomew's face was scrunched, and Shorty was busy setting lights for the paramedics.

"Viagra," Shorty replied.

"What?" asked Bob.

"Hey, I know guys who had been walking around at attention for hours after taking that stuff," Shorty informed him.

"Death did mention they seemed to have died happy," Bartholomew reminded them.

"Let's be honest, this is every guy's dream death," Shorty agreed. "Well, minus the entire part of being tied to a tree. Is this some form of strange sex ritual?"

"What are those bruises on the body?" Bob asked.

"They look like hickeys," said Bartholomew.

"How do you know?" Shorty turned to the younger man.

"Internet, Shorty."

"Everything is online now." Shorty shook his head.

"Did you find any clothes?" Bob asked, examining the scene.

"Found shorts and a wallet. Victim's name is Chance Rodgers." Shorty pointed to a corner with the items. "And a bottle of whiskey. I'm thinking we should ban whiskey in town."

"They are really making a killing here," Bartholomew said with a smirk.

Bob shook his head and bent over the body.

"Seriously, is this some cult sex killing going on?" Shorty stopped next to his light.

"Maybe we have a black widow in town," Bartholomew added in a more serious tone.

"Like Scarlet Johansson from the movies?" asked Shorty. "That is some hot shit."

"No," Bartholomew told him, walking around the body as well. "I was thinking more like the actual spider."

“Wait, what?” Shorty searched the grounds. “You mean we could have an actual shifter spider running around town? Gross.”

“Please tell me you are kidding?” asked Bartholomew. “It was okay when it was Scarlet doing the killing. But now it’s disgusting when it’s a spider?”

“Bart, my boy, have you seen spiders lately?” Shorty pointed around. “They are terrifying. Some girl shifting to a spider and laying eggs inside you is not a turn-on. Can they lay eggs?”

Shorty and Bartholomew both looked at Bob.

“I’m not in the middle of that conversation,” he told them. “Nor do we have any records of spider-shifters in town. Besides, didn’t you both read the autopsy reports? There was no mention of any eggs in their stomachs.”

“She found some weird substance in their stomach?” Bartholomew pointed.

“Maybe it’s spider venom?” Shorty added.

“Can we leave the spiders alone and get back to business? Where are our paramedics?” Bob searched the area for the crew.

“Here, boss,” Angela’s voice filled the air.

Bob stood and peered over the light to watch the doctor and Triplet-3 running towards them. Angela's normally neat mane was a mess. Strands were escaping her ponytail, and she had mascara smeared on her face.

“Sorry,” Angela told Bob. “Had a minor distraction getting here.”

Triplet-3 made hand signals behind the doctor to avoid people asking. Bob made eye contact with the man and nodded.

“Not a problem, doc,” said Bob. “Do your thing.”

Angela hurried towards the body and started her initial inspection. Bob moved cautiously around and pulled Triplet-3 back.

“What happened?” Bob whispered, with Shorty and Bartholomew leaning in.

“No idea, boss,” Triplet-3 replied. “One moment we were climbing in the ambulance. The next she is having a melt-down, throwing boxes around. She is not handling it well that Pete is in charge.”

“Thanks,” said Bob, and moved out of the way.

“Are you going to talk to her?” Shorty asked.

“Do I have a choice?”

“Nope,” replied Bartholomew. “This is why you are the intern. Good luck with that.” He patted Bob on the back and went around to search the rest of the area.

“Triplet-3, would you mind getting the stretcher for us, and something to cut these ropes?” Angela asked.

“On it, doc,” replied Triplet-3.

“Hey, Shorty,” Bob added. “Why don’t you give him a hand? It’s going to be tricky to get a stretcher back here.”

“Got it,” Shorty replied, saluting Bob, and running after Triplet-3.

He didn’t need an audience for this conversation, and Bob knew while his team was efficient, they were awful at any form of critical conversation. *“How did Isis handle this?”*

“Angela, what’s going on?” Bob asked softly, dropping to a crouch across from Angela and next to the body.

“I won’t know until I start my examination how long he has been dead, but by the looks of the erection can’t be that long.”

“Not what I meant, but thanks for that update,” Bob replied and waited.

“What do you mean?” Angela never looked up as she organized her tools from her medical bag.

“The smears on your face.” Bob pointed at the line of mascara running down her cheek.

“I’m fine.”

“You are a terrible liar,” he informed her, but waited quietly.

Angela moved her tools around in circles but never used them on the body. Slowly, she raised her face to look at Bob. Tears threatened to escape, and Bob had to hold himself back from hugging the young witch.

“Pete said I needed to get out of the hospital and head home,” Angela confessed.

Of all the things she could have said, that was not on Bob’s list. He pursed his lips, looking for the right words to clarify what the dilemma was.

“Okay,” he said, cautiously. “What is wrong with that?”

“You are going to fire me.” Angela’s dam of self-control busted, and she cried.

“Now I’m really confused,” Bob told her. “Why would I fire you?”

“How can I be your . . .?” Sobs made her stop. “The Chief medical examiner and doctor . . . and I can’t even keep an apartment.”

“Keep an apartment? What are you talking about?”

“When that lying asshole left me, he took all my money,” she wailed. “The apartment was under his name, and he broke the lease. They evicted me.”

“Did we stop paying you?” Bob wasn’t sure what was going on.

“I had put aside funds to support myself for a year, because most of my check is going to pay the assisted living facility for my mother in New England.” Angela covered her face and cried. “I was living in the morgue for the past month.”

“Angela.” Bob finally walked over and hugged her.

“I know, I’m a failure.” She allowed him to hug her, and the tears wouldn’t stop flowing.

“For the love of God, well my God, your goddess,” Bob mumbled, consoling the woman. “You are not a failure, but you should have told me. We have an entire dorm on the East Wing of the Station.”

“But men share those rooms,” she said, in between large sobs.

“What?” Bob pulled her aside to see her face. “You haven’t seen our living quarters?”

“Isn’t that where you sent me to sleep?”

“Oh, child.” Bob brushed the hair from her face. “You were staying in the bunk area where the people on duty stay while at work. We have private rooms with their own bathrooms further down for those who don’t want to live in the community. We are also building an entire living complex underneath the hospital.”

“Really?” Angela forced herself to stop crying.

“The morgue is no place to rest,” Bob reminded her. “You need a proper bed and a place you can call home. Shorty can issue you one of those suites. Where do you think Shorty lives?”

“Shorty lives at the Station?”

“So do the Triplets.” Bob smiled and Angela cried again. “What’s wrong?”

“It has been really hard these past few months,” she confessed.

“Angela, we weren’t kidding when we said we’ve all been homeless.” Bob faced her seriously. “My crew is not playing a new role every time they go out on the streets. Transitioning for many has been hard. If anyone knows what you are feeling, it’s this crew. We would never judge. We can’t.”

“I have been so embarrassed to say anything.”

“That I understand better than most.” Bob patted her arms. “But you are not alone, and we are here to help.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“That you won’t be sleeping in the morgue’s freezers again.” Bob raised them both up and held her firm by the shoulders. “Take the body back and forward me the report in the morning. As soon as you are done, get Shorty to transition you into a real permanent suite. Got it?”

“Yes, boss.” Angela launched herself at Bob and hugged him tight. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” Bob said, but smiled down at her. “You will probably need Bartholomew to soundproof your room. That group snores like wild beasts.”

Angela wiped her face with her sleeves and went back to work. Bob traced his steps back to his truck, where the three men were waiting for him.

“Is she going to be okay?” Shorty asked, leaning against the ambulance.

“Angela is joining the Station’s residence. Can you set her up with a suite?” Bob asked.

“Really?” Shorty asked. “The doc is moving in? Yes! She makes the best chocolate chip cookies in the world.”

“The way to your heart is definitely through your stomach,” Bob told his old friend.

“That’s it?” Triplet-3 asked.

“Do you remember the first time you were homeless?” Bob asked him.

“The first, the third, and the last time,” Triplet-3 admitted. “And here I thought she had her life put together and was judging us.”

“Now, who is being judgmental?” Shorty added.

“She has been through a lot, see if she needs help to move her stuff,” Bob told him.

“Of course, boss,” replied Triplet-3, dragging the gurney by himself.

“Aren’t you going to help him?” Bob asked Shorty.

“I’m on it,” he replied. “But is she going to be okay?”

“I hope so,” said Bob honestly. “We can fix sleeping conditions. Problems of the heart might be outside my scope of work.”

“You are good, my man,” Shorty told him and ran behind Triplet-3.

“You were really quiet over there,” Bob said to Bartholomew.

“We are running out of room in the permanent wing,” Bartholomew informed him.

“I know.” Bob rubbed his face. “How is that contract with the dwarfs?”

“On hold.” Bartholomew leaned against the ambulance next to Bob. “Their plans covered the distance of a football field, with lofts and almost fifty-foot ceilings. It’s literally an apartment complex they will build underground. We need to decide where they would expand.”

“Fine,” said Bob. “Let’s talk to the cities. We have enough money to purchase the land underneath the train tracks from them.”

“What are we going to tell them?”

“We are buying the rights to ensure nobody builds anything underneath those locations.” Bob pulled out his phone. “It’s free money for all of them and security for us.”

“I’ll get with Constantine to get those contracts developed and get the dwarfs back on the project.”

“If anyone can make a contract for us, it’s Constantine.”

Bartholomew smiled. “He didn’t get wealthy by accident. Anything else you need me to do?”

“Find out who that kid was?” Bob pointed toward the dead boy. “This is not a good sign of all these bodies popping up all at once.”

“I’m on it,” said Bartholomew. “I will run his ID and see what comes up on our database. See you at Reapers.”

Bartholomew vanished back to Nash. Divide and conquer was probably their best bet. Whoever was doing this was at least two steps ahead of them. Halloween was three days away and Bob needed to ensure Haven was secure. The last thing they needed was a serial killer loose in town with a bunch of tourists.

Chapter Twelve



Steam filled the bathroom as Nikita sat on the scorching bathtub. Her muscles ached, and the cut on her back throbbed. Shaking her head, she cursed herself for the fifth time that evening.

“That was the dumbest idea I had all week,” she told herself. “Carrying a grown ass werewolf across Ferguson Park. Of all the locations.”

The man was twice her size. Under the influence of her drugs, he was dead-weight. But he was such a talker. She couldn’t handle another minute listening to him ramble. That was the price to pay for silence. Carrying his ass all the way to the staging area.

She slid further down the tub, massaging her arms.

“It was his fault. Why did he have to touch her? Why can’t she see how dangerous they are? What if I wasn’t around to protect her? She is so naïve, and the world is so dangerous.”

Nikita knew she wasn’t being fair. Of all the people she encountered, her sister was the most loving person she knew. She didn’t have a mean bone in her body. It wasn’t like her to see the intentions of those around.

“How can I make her understand?”

Nikita knew her situation was impossible. Her sister didn’t know about her. Had no idea Nikita watched over her. The only thing Nikita ever wanted was to make sure she was safe.

“Everything I do is for you.”

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

Nikita grabbed her phone from the floor and read the message.

“Damn.” She was late.

Nikita jumped from the tub, spraying water all over the floor. Once again, she had lost track of time protecting her sister. Now she needed to rush across town to the Arkansas side to take care of business.

Earlier in the month, a retired teacher, who also was a witch, had hired her. The witch had been a widow for years. After being alone for so long, she remarried a much younger man, against the wishes of her kids. Now she was convinced the man was only after her money and was planning to kill her. Nikita wasn't sure about the last part, but after tailing him around, the man was a piece of work.

The husband was a drunk and a womanizer. Like many newlyweds, the wife still loved him and had reservations about hiring Nikita. It didn't take long to change her mind after Nikita delivered several photos of his clandestine affairs. The man wasn't the smartest one in the bunch, since he liked to keep a pretty set schedule of the people he visited. Nikita had picked this evening to set her plans in motion.

Grabbing a pair of jeans and a tank top, she rushed through her apartment. She had less than an hour to make it to Hope, AR, and take care of the job. The whole situation needed to look like an accident. Considering how much the husband drank, it shouldn't be too hard. Easy money for her. She just needed to make it there on time.

Chapter Thirteen



Bob strolled into his office with his nose in the stack of paper he carried. Humans were nothing more than lying sacks of crap.

“Altruistic, my ass,” Bob said to himself as he dropped the stack on his desk. “Money hungry, capitalist jackasses. That’s what that lot is.”

“Boss!” Abby shouted as she ran into the room at a full sprint. Her red hair bounced in the wind current she created as she almost ran over Bob.

“What in the hell?” Bob braced himself on the desk as he stopped Abby from knocking them both down. “Is there a fire in the building or did you get new sneakers?”

Abby looked down at her feet and her pristine pair of Mary-Janes. “No fire or shoes, but are you okay? I have been worried sick about you. I had everyone in the building monitoring their scans for you.”

“Why?” Bob eyed his secretary carefully to prepare for the horrible news he was sure was coming.

Abby adjusted her jumper and placed her hands on her hips. “You weren’t here when I arrived at seven.”

“And?” Bob glanced around the room, waiting for whatever else would jump out at him.

“You are always here before me.” Abby paced around the room. “It was seven-thirty. You still hadn’t arrived. Nobody had heard from you, and you were not in any of the usual places. What if the syringe bandit got you?”

“I’m killing Shorty,” Bob slapped his face. “What has that crazy fool been telling you?”

“I wasn’t believing him until eight fifteen rolled around, and you were late for court.” Abby waved her hands in the air. “I knew something horrible happened to you, and we were going to find you dead in a ditch.”

“Because calling my cell phone was out of the question?” Bob pulled his phone from his pocket and waved it in front of Abby.

“Wait?” Abby rushed to Bob and took his phone. “But if you have your phone, whose cell is that on your desk?”

“Mine,” Bartholomew whispered in her ear as he popped into the room.

Abby screamed at the top of her lungs and dropped the phone. “You did that on purpose!”

“I might have left my phone here earlier today,” Bartholomew confessed as tears of laughter rolled down his cheeks at the enraged Abby.

Bob ran a finger over his ear to clear the buzzing sound created by Abby.

“That’s it,” Bob said. “You are forbidden to teleport in the building.”

“You said I could use it to come in, but not around.” Bartholomew pouted.

“All rights have been revoked,” Bob stated. “You are only allowed to teleport to your office, and that’s it. Pass the message to Isis. No more scaring people to death and driving me deaf.”

“Not fair, but so worth it.” Bartholomew laughed. “You should have seen your face Abby, it was priceless.”

Abby slapped Bartholomew’s stomach. “You are not my favorite person right now.”

“Before you declare a national emergency, let’s aim to call me, okay?” Bob confirmed with his secretary.

“Yes, boss.” Abby dropped her head. “But are you okay?”

“For now, I’m perfectly fine,” Bob replied. “I might be dead once Constantine finds out the humans want over three million dollars for the underground land. Something about liability if the building collapses if we try to build.”

“Did you tell them the most superior builders in the world were getting ready to break ground in their city?” Bartholomew joked.

“Of course, I did.” Bob waved his hands in the air. “Right after I clarified that Union Station has an elevator to hell and three new subterranean levels with its own morgue. I’m sure that would absolutely help in the negotiations.”

“But they agreed to sell the land.” Bartholomew walked around the desk and took his cell.

“Humans would sell their mothers if they thought it would be profitable, you know that.” He handed the stack of papers to Bartholomew and took a seat. “Now, Abby, what else did I miss?”

Abby composed herself but struggled to get her hair under control. Bob examined the girl and noticed the deep circles under her eyes.

“Did you get the new prescription yet?” he asked before she could brief him.

“No.” Abby shook her head.

“What happened?”

Abby played with her fingers and shivered slightly.

“Abby?” Bob prodded.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” said Abby. “But doc seemed distracted yesterday when I stopped by.”

“Was she mean to you?” Bartholomew jumped in, looking at the folder with the papers.

“NO!” Abby said, louder than was necessary. “She was maybe just short.”

“Angela has a lot going on,” Bob explained. “Stop by today and see if she can change your prescription. You look like you need rest.”

“I was afraid to take the Ambien but then I couldn’t rest, had crazy dreams,” Abby admitted.

“Get the new meds today,” Bob ordered. “Please tell Shorty I’ll be at court in fifteen. We are changing court hours to nine starting today, and only Monday through Wednesday. Things will change around here.”

“Yes, sir.” Abby saluted and ran out the door.

“Wow, you are changing court hours, really?” Bartholomew asked with a smirk. “You have never changed times for less. The last few years, you have been extending hours more and more.”

“Yes, and all it has done is people bringing us their dumbest problems,” Bob replied. “They don’t need a court system. This community needs to get along better. Problems need to be resolved at the lowest level, not mine.”

“Uh oh,” Bartholomew teased. “This is the intern’s Burnt-out Phase.”

“What?”

“You heard me.” Bartholomew pointed a finger at him. “You remember when Isis went through that phase and snapped at everyone around. You,

my friend, are getting there. This means you need a vacation.”

“I don’t need a vacation.”

“You also should start dating as well,” Bartholomew continued.

“Are you serious?”

“You have no life.” Bartholomew dropped the files on the desk. “When was the last time you went on a date?”

“We are in the middle of a crisis, might have a serial killer loose, and you think I should date. Bartholomew, have you lost your mind?”

“Nope, but I’m preparing you for the conversations to come with Isis and Constantine. I recommend you have a plan or a vacation spot. The dating madness is coming.”

“Great.” Bob rolled his eyes. “But can we get back to work now?”

“Sure.” Bartholomew stood straight and saluted Bob with military precision. “What do you need from me, boss?”

“You are such a ham.” Bob walked around and sat on his chair behind his desk. “Shorty had me thinking last night.”

“This can’t be good.”

“Not about the spiders,” Bob added quickly. “But what if we have some weird rituals going on? Wouldn’t be the first time some satanic forces came to town?”

“What do you have in mind?”

“I really hate to admit it, but we need to check with Jake.”

Bob was not a fan of having to deal with the devil. While he understood the delivery of souls had to be made to hell, he never enjoyed the interaction with the fallen angel. Jake, as he went by, was nothing like Bob expected. Instead of a beast of flames with horns and a tail, Jake was more like a GQ model. Everything about the being radiated power, seduction, and promises. Isis had joked she understood how people sold their souls to him.

If Bob could avoid him, he would eliminate all interactions with the devil. Unfortunately, as part of his job as an intern, it involved talking to the being. The good news was, with Reapers around, the job could be spread between them. Isis usually took one for the team and went on those errands. With her trailing behind her godmother in Africa, Bob feared he would have to do the deed.

“Do you want me to go?” Bartholomew offered, staring at Bob’s worried face.

“Do you want to?” Bob asked softly.

“Not really, but it’s probably safer than you.” Bartholomew pointed at Bob’s forehead. “You look like a vein is about to burst on your head.”

“I’m sorry,” Bob dropped his head to his hand. “I know it’s part of the job, but he freaks me out.”

“He is the devil,” Bartholomew reminded him. “He really should.”

“True, but.” Bob took a deep breath. “It feels like he knows our most intimate desires.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised.” Bartholomew leaned against the desk.

“What if he makes me an offer and I can’t refuse?”

“What? An Emeril Lagasse’s kitchen? What could the devil possibly offer you that you couldn’t get yourself? Or that Constantine couldn’t match or top?” Bartholomew ticked off the options with his fingers and Bob glared.

“That’s a different way of looking at this.”

“Also,” Bartholomew interrupted him. “Your soul already belongs to Death. Even if Jake tried to make a play for it, he would be outmatched.”

“I knew that.” Bob slapped himself softly. “But he still scares the crap out of my soul.”

“Good. That is a very healthy fear.” Bartholomew gave Bob a thumb-up. “Do you still want me to go?”

“Would you, please?”

“Absolutely.”

“You are not afraid of meeting with him?”

Bartholomew shook his head. “I don’t trust him and will never make deals with his ass, but fear is not there. Something shifts in you once you die. I’m no longer human and in reality, I’m a part of Death. There is nothing he wants or could get from me.”

“Thank you so much, Bart.” Bob relaxed and let his shoulders droop a few inches. “But you really can’t go alone.”

“I can ask Eugene,” Bartholomew announced with too much joy that made Bob uncomfortable.

“I don’t know.” Bob tapped on his desk. “Isis said Eugene should never go back to The Cave.”

“That’s not what she said,” Bartholomew corrected. “She said Eugene should never go back to that club alone. But I’ll be there.”

“Do you honestly think you can keep that dancing-queen in check, at a club run by the devil?” Bob’s eyes were wide. “He is not dead or an intern

for Death. If we lost him to the devil, Pestilence would seek a plague on us so that not even Moses could help us.”

“You have been spending way too much time with Shorty. The two of you are top-tier dramatic.”

Bob glared but focused on arranging the papers on his desk. “I don’t like it, but we don’t have a lot of choices. Fine. See if Eugene can go with you. Hopefully, it’s like River dance music and he won’t get lost at the party.”

“Please!” Bartholomew burst in laughter. “You know Eugene dances even to commercials. I wouldn’t be surprised if that guy has a pair of tap shoes ready for that occasion.”

“Bart, you are not helping me here.”

“Sorry.”

“Check with Constantine for theme and location for the Cave’s entrance for the night. Then see if Eugene can come out and play,” Bob ordered.

“Too easy.”

“Before you go, can you stop by the morgue and see if Angela has found anything for us?”

“Am I looking for anything specific?”

“I’ll take any clue.”

Bartholomew saluted and headed out of the office. “See, I’m using the door!” he shouted over his shoulder.

Bob shook his head at the young Reaper. It didn’t matter how old he looked, Bartholomew was still a teenager and did teen stuff.

“Boss.” Abby leaned around the door.

“Yes, Abby,” Bob replied, picking up a pile of reports on his desk.

“You will not like this,” Abby said softly, taking small steps into the office. “Mr. Shorty said a fight broke out in the waiting room and two witches got pixied already.”

“Could I charge someone for dirtying my floor?” Bob replied instead and Abby stopped walking.

“You could technically fine them the cost of cleaning the place from pixie dust, or any blood sprayed,” Abby offered.

“Abby, you are a genius.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” Bob stood from his desk. “I’m going to change for court. I don’t want my nice vest to get dirty today. Call Shorty and let him know to keep

all the fighters in the court but not to offer any medical aid. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Not a problem." Abby turned around to execute her orders with a smile on her face.

"Abby," Bob said softly.

"Yes, boss."

"And when you are done, head to the sub-basement to talk to the doctor."

"Yes, boss." This time, the smile was gone, and Abby dropped her head.

Bob smirked. Once, he wondered if he had missed his chance in life to have children. No, he hadn't. They just came in adult size with different issues.

'Instant family, just add Bob.'

He reminded himself of Isis's phrase to him. This was definitely the family he never expected, and he couldn't be too busy to take care of them. But right now, it was time to be sheriff of this mess. He couldn't get upset. It was his goodwill that had created the drama. Time for tough-love and lots of fines. If anything, he was going to be making some money from his new plan.

Chapter Fourteen



The juice from the apple ran down Bartholomew's chin, and he wiped it with his shirt. If his sister ever caught him doing that, she would ground him for a week. He smiled at the thought and realized he missed her. They shared a telepathic connection, but he hated to bother her when they were across the world from each other. She also needed to stay focused on the moment when dealing with her godmother and the Order of headstrong witches.

Bartholomew was glad he didn't have to spend too much time with the Order. They were exhausting on a good day and infuriating on others. He blamed their insane superiority complex for having lived for hundreds of years hiding from the humans. All that power probably did something to their psyche. Organized witches always looked pissy.

Please don't let me get that way, Lord, Bartholomew prayed.

That was something else he found interesting. Before his death, he hadn't been a religious person. Knowing that the supernatural world was real and being Death's ward had a way of destroying theology. But in that moment when he died and met God, he felt peace. The religions of the world didn't get it all wrong, but they sure weren't right. God was love and peace and every emotion humans felt, but all harmonized into perfection.

Bartholomew took another bite from his apple and busted through the double doors of the morgue like he was the new contestant on *The Price is Right*.

“What’s going on with the fabulous fantastic duo?” Bartholomew shouted as he entered.

Angela turned around to face him, holding the spleen of the body she was operating on. TJ held a tray with other body parts over the body. They both stared at Bartholomew through their face shields.

“Jesus Christ, doc.” Bartholomew covered his face from the sight of body parts. “Have you considered putting a sign on the door?”

Angela dropped the spleen on the tray and raised her shield to give Bartholomew her greatest glare.

“Are you serious?” she asked. “You walk into the morgue side of the hospital, and I need to put a sign for your convenience?”

“Yes!” exclaimed Bartholomew but took another bite as he strolled over. “You should consider those blinking lights that they have on movie sets when they are recording. Right outside the door. It would be perfect.”

“Or you can just stay outside my operating room all the time,” she informed him.

Bartholomew glanced over at TJ, who shrugged as he placed the tray on the table. Angela leaned over Bartholomew and took a bite out of his apple.

“Hey,” he shouted, but held the apple firm for her. “This is why you don’t have any friends. You know it’s a rule you shouldn’t be eating a man’s food. I could have rabies.”

“Do you?” she asked him. “I have shots for that.”

“I really think you are just looking for excuses to see me naked.” He moved away from the doctor with his apple.

Angela winked at TJ, who held back the laughter.

“But what do we owe the pleasure of your great visit?” Angela teased him.

“I don’t even know why you are pretending, it’s not like I’m not your favorite Reaper,” Bartholomew fired back.

“I don’t know, I really like Isis.”

Bartholomew stopped and glanced back at the doctor.

“Isis is pretty cool,” TJ added, making Bartholomew flip him off.

“But you are both right. Isis is pretty cool,” Bartholomew conceded. “I’ll give you that. But I’m your favorite male Reaper.”

“You are the only one,” Angela informed him.

“Not I’m not.” Bartholomew shook his head. “Just because the others are back chilling in the river Styx does not make me the only one. TJ has met

them.”

“Really?” Angela turned.

“It was like meeting an army of three hundred pissed off Spartans straight out of hell,” TJ told her. “That group is the scariest thing you will have to meet.”

“They are pretty intense,” Bartholomew agreed. “And technically, the river Styx is in the same dimension as hell, so you are not totally wrong. I’m just glad when the apocalypse comes, they are on our side.”

“Well, in that case, I’m not sure if you are my favorite Reaper after all.” Angela took off her gloves. “I might like intense.”

Bartholomew eyed her up and down and shook his head. “Then they say men are weird.”

Angela took the rest of the apple from his hands and started eating. “Back to business. What do you need?”

“Obviously, not my apple.”

“Obviously,” TJ confirmed.

“Bob wants an update,” Bartholomew went back to business.

“Next time you should bring two apples and maybe some oranges, and a grilled cheese sandwich,” Angela told him.

“You know we have a five-star chef manning our kitchen, right?” Bartholomew informed the doctor.

“We do?”

“I swear, you are not new.” Bartholomew pointed at TJ. “I expect those types of questions from him. What have you been eating this whole time?”

“Leftovers.” Angela munched on the apple.

“Do you need a tour of the place?” Bartholomew placed his hands over his hips, in a great imitation of Peter Pan, and was tapping his foot.

“I never had time,” Angela confessed. “Besides, I figured the meals were pretty pricey here.”

Bartholomew held the doctor by the shoulders and stared at her directly in the eyes. “I have the urge to shake some sanity into you, but I’m afraid of rattling your brain. So, I’ll explain very slowly.”

Angela punched him in the stomach, and Bartholomew released his hold on her. She stuck her tongue out at him.

“All jokes aside.” Bartholomew faced Angela. “All meals, snacks, and even fancy coffees are free to all staff and volunteers. We really should

make sure everyone knows that. Also, while on duty, if you cannot stop for lunch, call the main desk and food will be brought to you.”

“Has that always been the case?” TJ jumped in.

“Yes,” Bartholomew replied, turning to face his friend. “Let me guess, that douchebag George never told you?”

Angela shook her head.

“I’m so sorry about him,” Bartholomew told her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders.

“You are going to get blood all over you.” She pushed him away.

“Won’t be the first time.” Bartholomew kissed the top of Angela’s head, and for the first time he felt like the older one between the two of them.

Bartholomew would make it a point to find George and have a few chosen words with him. Or even better, he would tell Isis and have her talk to him. His sister was terrifying when she put her mind to it.

“I’ll have Pete stop by and go over the process with both of you,” Bartholomew told them.

“Does it have to be Pete?” Angela mumbled.

“He is not that bad,” Bartholomew defended the Pixie. “But he is going to be furious when he learns that you two didn’t know the procedures. It would also help explain why the medical staff never ate with the team.”

“Were we supposed to?” TJ asked.

“Everyone on duty does supper together,” Bartholomew added. “Rumor has it you guys think you are too good to eat with the rest of us.”

“Wait, what?” Angela almost dropped the apple. “For the last month I was eating nothing but ramen noodles, instead of a five-star meal, and I think I’m too good? Somebody better save me a plate tonight, or I’ll eat Pete’s.”

“You will fit right in.” Bartholomew gave her a fist bump and Angela returned it. “But can we get back to work? Some of us have things to do besides BS around with you two.”

“What?” Angela slapped his abs again.

“Ouch.” Bartholomew bent over in mock pain. “You are going to leave a bruise if you keep this up.”

“A bruise on your ego, boy,” she informed him, but made her way around the body toward the laptop on a stand. “You have less fat than TJ, and he has muscles on top of his muscles.”

“That’s right,” TJ replied, flexing.

“Time for the gun show,” Bartholomew added, also flexing with his friend.

Angela gave a flat stare at both of the guys and turned her back on them. Bartholomew and TJ busted into fits of laughter.

“You love us,” said Bartholomew.

“We finished the autopsy on victim one, Mr. Claus,” Angela started her lecture, ignoring the giggles of the boys. “He didn’t have any previous health conditions, and besides his heart stopping, he was doing amazing. The blood reports showed traces of Ecstasy in his system.”

“E?” Bartholomew asked. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, why?”

“Because Pestilence had been forbidden to sell the stuff in Haven, even in their own club after the last incident,” TJ explained.

“The only way for Eugene to be selling again is if Pestilence made him,” Bartholomew explained. “I’m going to call him in a few and I’ll check with him.”

“How bad is it if they are still selling?” Angela asked.

“If Death gives the direct order to one of her siblings, she expects them to follow it,” Bartholomew replied. “Death doesn’t do well when she has to repeat herself.”

“Could it be someone else?” Angela continued.

“That’s a good question.” Bartholomew walked over to the computer area where Angela was standing. “Do you have a sample of the blood? I can take it to Eugene and have it compared with his stuff. If it wasn’t them, he might tell us a bit more.”

“Do you think he could find something I couldn’t?” Angela asked, biting her lips.

“Angela, you are good,” said Bartholomew. “And when you do your magic thing, you are one of the best doctors in the south.”

“But?”

“But Eugene is a scientist for a Horseman. His resources and magic trumps ours when it comes to science.” Bartholomew patted her on the shoulder. “Not a bad thing, being second to the best.”

“Thanks,” Angela replied in a flat tone. “TJ prepare a sample for his highness over here.”

“Why am I always in trouble with you?”

“Because it’s you. But I’m actually going to need a favor from you.”

“Now you need me.” Bartholomew leaned over, flexing his biceps for her.

“I want to conduct a full autopsy on the new corpse we found last night,” Angela said, pointing to one freezer.

“But?” Bartholomew asked, glancing over his shoulder.

“I kind of need permission,” she said sweetly.

“Of course, you do.” Bartholomew took a deep breath. “Let me check with Bob if he has done the notice yet. If not, I’ll get permission as well. But you have to be really nice to me.”

“You are the best, Bart!” Angela said, full of sarcasm rubbing his biceps, but Bartholomew glared at her.

Knock. Knock.

The group turned towards the door to see Abby’s sweet face peeking in the room. “Can I come in?”

“See how it’s done?” Angela chastised Bartholomew. “Of course, come in.”

“Thank you.” Abby took cautious steps into the morgue. “Mr. Bob said I should come down and see if you could prescribe me something for . . .”

Abby stopped talking, eyes fixed on the open body on the operating table.

“Oh Go . . .” she couldn’t finish, as she gagged at the sight, her face drained of all color. Abby turned around in one smooth motion and ran out of the room.

“Abby!” TJ shouted.

He turned to follow behind but slammed against the tables with the organs, knocking a few trays down.

“I would recommend taking off the Frankenstein bloody apron, and the shield, before running after her,” Bartholomew said. “You don’t want to add to the experience.”

TJ inspected himself and found blood running down his operating apron and gloves.

“Good call,” he said, undressing as he walked out of the morgue.

“Now you see how I was right.” Bartholomew beamed next to the doctor. “A little blinking red light over the door would stop poor, innocent souls from losing their lunches because of this.”

“You know how much I hate when you are right.” Angela scolded. “Who do I need to request a light from?”

“Who else? Pete.”

“Why is he in charge of everything?”

“‘Cause he is the only one here all the time,” Bartholomew explained. “And he knows where to find anything you need. You are going to love him if you just give him a chance.”

“Am I?”

Bartholomew took a long look at Angela and then shook his head. “No, you are not. The two of you are going to kill each other every day. It’s going to be epic.”

“Get out of my morgue!” Angela shouted. “I’ll have TJ deliver the sample when he comes back.”

“But I can help.”

“Bartholomew! Out!”

Angela pushed Bartholomew all the way across the morgue and out the door. Bartholomew didn’t struggle with her. It was nice seeing the doctor back to her normal self, full of spunk and attitude.

Chapter Fifteen



A quick text from Bob revealed the notification to the family had not been done. The meeting with the city officials had thrown off his schedule. This left Bartholomew with having to do the horrible deed two days in a row. As he sat in Lexi outside a two-story home on Country-hill Road on the Arkansas side, he wondered what made him agree to do this.

Oh yeah, I was trying to make Angela feel part of the family again, Bartholomew reminded himself. *That was a dumb move on my part.*

The adrenaline that had motivated him earlier in the day was gone. Maybe it was dressing in his professional clothes that had done it. Either way, his palms were sweating even with the AC blasting on him.

For a being that is not supposed to sweat under any conditions, I'm doing it a lot lately.

He needed to focus on getting a hold of himself. Nobody wanted to receive bad news from a nervous wreck.

Knock.

The tap on the passenger side window made him jump. He really needed to get his head in the moment, or someone would knock him off. Bartholomew lowered the window.

“Bart,” a Union Station informer said. “Shorty sent me to be your backup.”

Bartholomew couldn't see his face but recognized the voice of Triplet-2. The man leaned against the car with his back towards Bartholomew like there wasn't anything wrong with that.

“Thanks,” Bartholomew replied. “Going in. Let me know if you see anything suspicious in the neighborhood.”

“On it.” Triplet-2 moved slowly away, dragging his left leg.

In the last few months, the Triplets had added physical disabilities to their undercover gear when on duty. They noticed most humans never paid attention to their faces if they had a limp or deformity. If anything, they avoided the sight of them at all costs. When asked about the individual, rarely could anyone describe them. It was like they made themselves invisible in plain sight.

Triplet-2 dropped a can on the street, a signal Bartholomew recognized as all clear. He couldn’t wait any longer now that his backup had arrived. Shorty had declared the situation too suspicious for anyone to be alone in the city. Bartholomew had laughed, not to his face, of course. Shorty would have poked his eyes out.

Of all the members of Union Station, after Isis, he was the most dangerous. Except everyone still saw him as the baby of the group. Bartholomew had mixed feelings about the status. He wasn’t sure if he was ready for people to see him differently. To acknowledge the truth, that he had been remade and wasn’t human anymore. If he was honest with himself, he wasn’t ready for any of that.

Maybe a compromise. Maybe they could see me as a young adult.

But Isis had busted that bubble for him. While she recognized he was a lethal adult with superpowers, he was always going to be her little brother. Bartholomew just needed to accept the truth.

Truth is, you have a job to do. Suck it up.

Bartholomew adjusted his vest and stepped out of Lexi. Constantine had laughed at him, saying he looked like a tan version of Bob. Considering all his formal clothes were in his dirty laundry basket, baby-Bob would need to do. He didn’t mind; he admired how well-dressed Bob was.

He slammed the door shut and marched to the front door. Stalling now was just ridiculous. Bartholomew wasn’t sure how this house still had manicured lawns when everyone around them had dead grass for the fall. The green was in such disagreements with all the neighbors.

The front door opened before he could ring the doorbell. A large woman, over six feet tall and probably three hundred pounds of solid muscle, stared back at Bartholomew. It was the first time in years Bartholomew felt small, even thought he was over six feet tall himself.

“You found him,” the woman muttered in a soft voice that didn’t belong to the large body.

“I’m sorry, what?” Bartholomew struggled to make sense of the sentence.

“My son,” she drawled. “That’s why you are here. I reported him missing last week.”

Bartholomew pulled his cell out and found his notes. “Ma’am, is your son Chance Rodgers?”

“Oh Gods, no!” She dropped to the ground as tears rushed down her cheeks.

Helpless, Bartholomew kneeled with her, holding her hand.

“He’s dead, right?”

“I’m so sorry, but yes.”

The sobs overtook the woman, and her entire body shook with the pain. Bartholomew was lost and stayed with her, holding space for her. There was nothing he could say to make her pain any less. It was the same pain that he had seen in Isis when he appeared next to her after Death brought him back. An emptiness that takes over the soul. He rubbed his hands down her back, letting her cry.

From across the street, Bartholomew could see Triplet-2 with his head bowed. Everyone understood loss and pain. Even the street felt like it was holding its breath for her. Giving her time to empty herself of tears. No parent should ever bury a child. That was the rule.

It took several long minutes before the mother could gain her composure. “When can I see him?” she asked hoarsely.

“He is at the Station now,” Bartholomew replied. “Can I help you inside?”

The mother nodded, and Bartholomew raised her to her feet. It was probably a good thing he was the one who came. Bartholomew doubted even Bob, with his extra strength, would have been able to move her. Carefully, Bartholomew brought her into the house.

The living room was lavishly decorated. Large leather couches sat in a comfortable but professional style. A large mahogany coffee table lay in the center, with a crystal bowl. Family photos decorated the foyer and Bartholomew understood the need for the large space. The Rodgers were pretty large people. His report stated they were werewolves. He wondered if they were mixed with giants as well.

Setting the mother gently on the large sectional, Bartholomew took a seat next to her. The mother dropped her head on the armrest and cried. Her suffering was raw, and Bartholomew struggled to not cry with her.

“Did he suffer?” she asked between sobs.

“He definitely did not go suffering, I can guarantee that,” Bartholomew answered truthfully.

That made the mother stop crying and raised her head to face the young Reaper. “But you are The Reaper.”

Bartholomew wasn’t sure if that was a question or a statement, so he merely nodded.

“My son has been missing for over four days,” she told him. “You are telling me he wasn’t tortured or mutilated?”

Bartholomew swallowed trying to find the right words to explain to a mother the state they found her son.

“Well,” he started. “He didn’t have any torture marks, as far as we could tell. Unless he was allergic to lipstick and biting.”

The mother’s expression went blank, and Bartholomew shrugged.

“Ma’am, I really don’t know how to say this,” he admitted.

“Please, just the truth.”

“We don’t know what happened to him,” Bartholomew informed her. “We found his body last night at Ferguson Park tied to a tree.”

“And he wasn’t tortured?” she asked.

“Well . . .” Bartholomew paused and prepared to say the rest as quickly as possible. “We found him naked, but he had a full erection with a smile on his face. I’m pretty sure your definition of torture and what happened were not the same.”

Bartholomew exhaled and leaned back on the couch.

“Are you serious?” the mother asked. “He died during sex?”

Bartholomew made a half gesture with his hands and waited.

“That’s insane,” said the mother. “You are going to find out what happened to my son.”

“That’s why I’m here, ma’am,” answered Bartholomew, relieved he didn’t have to describe anything else to a mother about their son’s last sex adventure. “We would like to conduct an autopsy on him. Would you give us permission?”

“Absolutely,” she said patiently. “I bet it was those assholes from the Coleman clan. They did it.”

“They did what?” asked Bartholomew. “Was your son dating someone from the Coleman clan?”

“My god has my soul, never!” She held her chest with her hands like she had been stabbed.

“Then why did you think they did it?”

“They are losing ground and afraid we will take over.” The mother stood from the couch and paced the living room. “But taking my youngest is a declaration of war.”

“War? Hold on!” Bartholomew jumped to his feet. “Let’s not jump to conclusions now. We really don’t know what happened. There is no need to go fighting anyone.”

“Why? Are you on their side?” Rage radiated off her body and Bartholomew could see the signs of the shift coming.

Pulling his small cylinder rod from his back pocket, Bartholomew engaged the mechanism with his thumb. In three breaths, the cylinder transferred to his six-foot-tall scythe. At the same time, Bartholomew unleashed his own power, slamming it against the mother. He didn’t want to hurt her, but a reminder of who was the true alpha in the room was necessary.

The mother stumbled back. She was strong, but Bartholomew was death itself. Silver eyes glowed down on the woman, and she dropped to the ground.

“Do not test me, woman,” Bartholomew said with a voice that was deeper than his own. “You will not win this battle.”

Covering her face, she cried again. “Reaper, please. No!”

The fear on her face hit Bartholomew in the gut, but not enough to drop his powers or his scythe.

“Let me remind you, woman, that this is Haven, and it is neutral ground. If a war starts in our domain, we will wipe three generations off the face of this planet, regardless of whose side started it. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Reaper.” The mother was on her knees, bowed down to him.

The act made Bartholomew’s stomach turn. He retracted his scythe and placed it back in his pants. Hoping he wouldn’t regret it, he lowered his power and bent down next to the mother. She flinched, but Bartholomew didn’t back away. Slowly, he raised her back to her feet and onto the couch.

“We will find out what happened to your son, and justice will be done,” he told her in his normal voice. “But do nothing you will regret or force our

hand. I do not make empty threats.”

“It makes little sense,” she whispered.

“Now we are both in agreement,” he told her. “Can you tell me when the last time was you saw your son?”

“We have lunch every Friday, but he never made it,” she said. “He moved on his own to Ashdown last year, but he is still a mama’s boy. I knew something was wrong when he didn’t call me back. But it wasn’t until last night when I felt it. My son had left this world.”

Bartholomew had heard of mothers knowing when their children passed but had never met one. It was a strange phenomenon. She was positive she knew when he died.

“Did your son do drugs, by any chance?”

“Absolutely not.” She sat up on the couch. “The pack has strict rules against any of those human drugs or enhancers.”

“Really?” It was the first time Bartholomew had heard that.

“Let’s just say human drugs and many shifters don’t mix. Some can cause paralysis or even death.”

“Does everyone know that?”

“Older shifters should, but the young are hard-headed and sometimes don’t listen.” She glanced at Bartholomew. “Why?”

“We are just ruling things out,” he replied. “You can contact the Station and make an appointment with our doctor to see the body. She can accommodate your schedule.”

“You promise he didn’t suffer?”

“Yes,” Bartholomew replied. “Death escorted his soul to his final destination. He was at peace and very well guarded until the end.”

“Thank you.”

“We will be in touch.” Bartholomew nodded to the mother and marched himself out of the house.

He didn’t fear turning his back on her. They both knew he was stronger and faster than she was. Bartholomew had delivered a hard blow. She was looking for someone to blame. Closing the door behind him, he strolled toward the Lexus. Triplet-2 was sitting on the hood, hand inside his coat. When he saw Bartholomew, he released the gun he was holding and took a long breath.

“Bart my man, are you okay?” Triplet-2 said, jumping off the car.

“You know you are my boy, but if you scratched my car, I’m going to beat you,” Bartholomew told him, inspecting the hood of his car.

“Oh please,” said Triplet-2, staring at Bartholomew. “You are not even a car kind of guy. Seriously, what happened? I felt your powers ripple down the street. Every person who was in the neighborhood either fled or locked themselves in their house.”

“Things got a bit intense in there,” was all Bartholomew told him.

“A bit?” Triplet-2 glanced around the street. “There is not an animal in sight for at least a mile. If I wasn’t part of the crew, I would have bounced with the rest.”

“I might have gone to the extreme.” Bartholomew scratched the back of his head, embarrassed. “Just needed to make sure she knew who was in charge and I didn’t want to hurt her. But why didn’t you flee?”

“It was weird.” Triplet-2 adjusted his holster. “It was like your power pulled me towards the house.”

“Interesting.” Bartholomew smiled. “Good to know.”

“What?”

“That if I’m ever in trouble and unleashed my powers, anyone from our team in the proximity would come to me.”

“Now that is a pretty handy trick.” Triplet-2 nodded in approval.

“Especially with Isis,” Bartholomew added. “If you felt my power, it means if Isis is in trouble, the team will sense her as well. Just in case I’m not nearby to help her.”

“Now that’s a blessing right there,” Triplet-2 said. “Cause we all know Isis is a magnet for trouble.”

“Amen to that.”

“So, what’s the plan?”

“Do we have any more people in this location?” Bartholomew scanned the area.

“Not this close.” Triplet-2 pulled out his phone. “I can move a few if we need it.”

“I need you to monitor who comes and goes from this house. Also, find out who the members of this pack are.”

“Got it.” Triplet-2 took a few notes down. “What am I looking for?”

“Stopping a pack war before it starts.”

Triplet-2 stopped typing and glanced at Bartholomew.

“The mother thinks the Coleman clan was the one who kidnapped her son. I didn’t even know he was missing. I don’t like this at all.”

“This is not good at all.”

“Get eyes on all the clan leaders. We need to figure out what is really happening.” Bartholomew unlocked Lexi.

“Bart, out of curiosity, what happens if a war breaks out in Haven?”

“We kill them all, let God sort them out.” Bartholomew quoted the old 82nd Airborne mantra.

“Brutal, but effective,” said Triplet-2.

“Tell me about it. Let’s make sure we don’t have to.”

Triplet-2 saluted, and Bartholomew climbed into his vehicle. He leaned back and realized for the first time that Triplet-2 had saluted him the same way he did Isis and Bob. Not out of fear, but respect. Maybe the team didn’t see him as a kid.

Maybe the only one who sees me as a kid is me.

It took him a minute to adjust his mind to the new information. Bartholomew was no longer a kid, but a leader of Reapers Inc., and it was time he embraced it. It didn’t mean he had to act any differently, he just didn’t need to be ashamed of what he was.

“If Isis can be a Reaper, so can I!”

Taking a long look in the rear-view mirror, he saw the image of the young boy he was five years ago at his death and the one staring at him now. Slowly, he found the images merging. He wasn’t two different people anymore. It was like he had broken in a new pair of shoes and now they fit just right. Bartholomew felt complete.

Chapter Sixteen



Political congregations all sucked, regardless if they were human or supernatural. Bob wasn't a fan of them. Having to start his day smooching up to the humans to get the rights to subterranean lands was a painful experience. Mediating a potential shifter war in Haven sounded like torture. But he couldn't run away from his responsibilities.

Bartholomew had stayed at the Station to coordinate patrol squads with Shorty and Pete. He had several of the rookies reviewing all the files for any more reports of missing shifters. Bob knew it was terrible timing to leave in the midst of all that work. But when Constantine called saying that the meeting with the matriarch of the Coleman clan was set up, Bob couldn't say no.

As soon as he arrived at Reapers, he rushed to his room to shave, shower, and look presentable. If Mrs. Ella was making the trip herself, then Bob couldn't afford to offend her by not looking his best. Ella Coleman was a true Southern lady and had the same sensibility for dressing as Death did. Bob pulled on a pair of slacks, boots, button-down shirt, and black tie. At least the tie had skulls on it. Bartholomew said it was only fitting Death's intern rock skulls in one of his outfits. Bob admired the combination before leaving his quarters on the first floor.

He took the stairs to the loft two at a time. The leadership was supposed to arrive around four. He had at least thirty to get himself situated and relaxed.

“Bob, have you seen my new camera?” Constantine shouted as soon as Bob opened the door.

“What camera?”

“The one on my new drone,” the cat informed him. “Look at this.”

Bob moved across the loft, towards the back where Bartholomew’s post was located. The main monitor on the wall had a clear, aerial view of Texarkana’s Spring Lake Park, on Summerhill Road.

“Boss, that is a hell of a shot,” said Bob. He admired the clear quality of the shot.

“It’s one of the military’s prototypes.”

Bob gave a side glance at Constantine, not sure if he should ask the obvious question. “Do I want to know?”

“Katrina sent me one.” Constantine informed him.

Katrina was the intern for the horseman War. She had become like a second daughter to Bob. A very irrational thought, since he knew Katrina was over seventy years old, even if she looked like a mid-twenties girl. After a crazy mission with Isis, that took both the girls to hell, Katrina had become part of the family. She was also the only person who could get Isis to take a vacation without complaining.

“Is she going to get in trouble for that?” Bob wasn’t sure how much power Katrina had these days.

When they met, War had demoted Katrina from General to Major for accidentally bringing temporary peace in the Middle East. With all the chaos going on in the world lately, Bob was sure Katrina was back on top, infiltrating all the militaries of the world.

“Do you know anyone that could stop that girl?” Constantine asked, as he controlled his drone away from the park and back to Nash. “This baby is going to be so much fun during our night missions. Do you know it comes equipped with rockets?”

“The world is not ready for you and a more deadly drone,” Bob informed him.

Ding.

The bell at the entrance of Reapers went off.

“Our guests are here,” said Constantine. “Would you mind letting them in while I bring this baby back home?”

“Sure thing.”

Bob moved to the desk where the cameras and controller for the doors were located. He took a seat behind Bartholomew's command center and checked the camera feed for the front of the building. Mrs. Ella and two others stood outside. Bob pressed the speaker button.

"Hello, please leave all weapons inside the security chamber after entering. The second gate will not open until you are fully clear."

Bob listened for a potential reply, but nothing came. Instead, one of the men returned to their vehicle and climbed inside.

"Interesting," Bob mumbled.

Mrs. Ella had a long, blue dress on with an enormous hat. She removed her hat and nodded at the camera. Bob considered informing them about the microphone but decided against it. If they didn't want to talk, he would not force them. He unlocked the main door, and Mrs. Ella and her security entered the screening area.

The room was custom made for Reapers. They had a similar one at the back for vehicles. The area detected not only human weapons, but spells, curses, and any form of supernatural weapon imaginable. It also provided an incredible X-ray of whatever being was inside. Bob was sure Reapers was more secure than the White House, even though it probably didn't appear like it from the outside.

The pair finished their screening, leaving three automatic weapons, five sets of knives, and throwing stars in the room. For shifters as powerful as they were, they were not taking any chances. Once inside, Bob headed toward the kitchen area to make some coffee. Everything was better with the magic brew.

"Is it me or is clearing our security taking longer and longer?" Constantine mentioned as he finished landing his drone on the roof of Reapers.

"Everyone wants to see what they can get away with," Bob told him.

"That is madness," said Constantine. "Oh good, you are making coffee. Make mine extra strong with a dash of Irish Cream."

"On purpose?" Bob asked as he prepared mugs for the visitors.

"Had a painful conversation with Pestilence."

"Aren't all your conversation with that one painful?" Bob pulled the bottle of Irish Cream from the cabinet.

Constantine had developed a strange liking to it, so they always had several bottles on hand. At least alcohol had no effect on the cat. He was

afraid to find out how a drunk Constantine would be.

A soft knock came from the front door of the loft.

“Come in,” said Bob.

The elegant Mrs. Ella stepped in, followed closely by a young shifter in flannel. The contrast between the two was jarring.

“Welcome, Matriarch,” said Constantine, jumping on the kitchen island to be eye level with his guest. “We are thrilled you could make it in such a short time.”

“We are in your debt, Master Constantine,” Mrs. Ella replied with a curt bow to the cat. Bob forced himself not to roll his eyes. “We came as soon as you called.”

“Please have a seat,” said Bob from behind the island. “Would you like some coffee?”

“That would be lovely, intern,” Mrs. Ella replied. “Black, please.”

Bob smiled. At least she knew how to properly drink coffee. A very good sign to start their meeting.

“And you?” Bob asked her security.

“No, thank you,” he said in a thick, southern accent.

Bob wondered how real it was. It seemed too thick to be natural. He learned earlier in the year that many of the transients were adopting a Texas drawl to confuse the natives. They also were pretending to be less educated and smarter than they were, to fool those they met. The one thing the young man couldn’t fool was the number of muscles in his body. He was Bob’s height, but with at least fifty pounds of muscles more than Bob. On average, Bob did not consider himself a small man, but if a fight broke out, he would need to cheat to win.

“You said this was important.” Mrs. Ella went straight to the topic as soon as she made herself comfortable. “What is it?”

“Has anyone from your clan gone missing recently?” Constantine asked.

“Missing?” Mrs. Ella replied.

“We received reports of missing shifters in the last week or so,” Bob provided the information as he sat the coffee cup down.

“Not that I know of. Lucas, double check for me please,” Mrs. Ella ordered, and the young man left the loft to make his call. “A few missing people don’t sound urgent enough to bring me here. What is really going on?”

“Have you been having any problems with the new packs that have moved into Haven?” It was Constantine’s turn to be direct.

While the Colemans were a powerful pack of werewolves, going back for centuries, they were not the only ones. Bob rarely had issues with any of their members. The matriarch kept a tight hold on her people and maintained order and peace in her area. But they were also known for running many of the underground fight clubs in Haven. Something Bob believed was a very lucrative investment.

“Nothing that we can’t handle,” she replied softly before taking a sip from her drink. “This is delicious, Mr. Bob.”

Bob blinked. It was the first time since she had used his name. “Glad you enjoy it. My blend. Beans imported from Guatemala.”

“Why am I not surprised you have imported beans?”

“We have people everywhere, not as hard as it sounds or impressive.” Bob brought a large mug for Constantine, adding the Irish Cream in front of the guest.

“I didn’t expect you to like your coffee spiked, Master,” Mrs. Ella told the cat.

“I have been experimenting with different things,” he said, then licking his own brew. “Been watching too much TikTok, and they had a video of a guy adding Irish butter to his coffee. Let me tell you, not as exciting as he made it out. This is much better.”

Mrs. Ella laughed, and Bob only closed his eyes. He couldn’t believe his boss had actually tried that challenge. It was a crime to add sugar and cream to a perfect cup of black coffee. To add butter was sacrilegious.

“I’m assuming that’s not the only thing you have to tell me,” Mrs. Ella told the pair.

“Nope, not at all,” Bob replied. “We’ve been hearing rumors of turf wars in Haven. You know the rules.”

Mrs. Ella didn’t answer, just sipped her coffee quietly.

“Your pack is being accused of kidnapping,” Constantine dropped the bomb, and Mrs. Ella choked on her coffee.

“What?” she asked after clearing her throat. “That is absurd, and you know it. Why would we go to that level?”

“We are not saying you did it,” Bob said calmly. “Just sharing the rumors. If a war starts in my city, it won’t be pretty for either side.”

“Are you threatening us, intern?” Mrs. Ella leaned forward in the chair.

“A threat means there is a possibility that we won’t do it,” Constantine clarified. “You and your people have my utmost respect, but we have one mission here. To keep Haven a neutral territory for everyone. We can turn a blind eye to certain activities as long as everyone involved is profiting and safe. War is a different story.”

“You have a city full of supernaturals, Constantine. Do you have enough allies behind you to keep order?” Mrs. Ella asked.

“Allies?” Constantine laughed. “We don’t need allies. I have two Reapers and an intern. Last time the truce in a Haven was breached, we burned that city to the ground. Or did you forget the Great Chicago fire of 1871?”

Mrs. Ella blanched and sank in the chair. “Hundreds died in that fire.”

“No, thousands were saved,” Constantine corrected. “The packs had escalated their attacks on the humans. It was only a matter of time before the world discovered the supernatural beings were real. That alone would have created panic and chaos. You know how humans react when faced with the unknown. Or do I need to remind you of Salem?”

Constantine scratched the table with his claws. The silence stretched between the group until Lucas walked inside.

“Mother, everyone is accounted for,” said Lucas. “Only Will and a few of the young ones are planning to go out to see a band this evening. Should we cancel it?”

Mrs. Ella shook her head. “Just make sure they all check in when they get back.”

“On it.” Lucas walked back to the balcony to disseminate the orders.

“See, everything is under control,” Mrs. Ella told them. “Anything else?”

“We are all on the same side, Ella,” Constantine told her. “But I will not endanger the lives of millions of beings for the petty actions of a few. If a war erupts in our town, there will be no survivors.”

“I’m too old for games, Master,” she answered. “The last thing I’m looking for is bloodshed. I’ll keep you informed if I hear anything.”

“Thank you, Ella,” Constantine told her.

She gave a half bow to the cat and stormed out the door.

“That went better than I expected,” said Bob.

He stood to watch the duo march down the stairs with a purpose.

“She doesn’t have to like it, but she knows we are right,” Constantine replied. “A war between shifters would get bloody. Humans would take notice, and that is the last thing we need.”

“My god!” Eugene shouted as he busted through the door. “I almost got ran over by the angriest shifters I’ve seen in years. Probably as angry as that gang we battled that time when they stole my drugs.”

“Hi, Eugene,” Bob said to Pestilence’s intern.

“What took you so long?” asked Constantine.

“Hey, some of us have work here.” Eugene dropped his messenger bag on the kitchen island and took a cup of coffee. “Not everyone can just chill at home watching YouTube and pissing off competitors. Did you find who hacked you?”

Eugene took a seat in front of Constantine, wiggling his eyebrows like a five-year-old. Bob couldn’t deny it. Isis was right; Eugene looked like a young Fresh Prince. If Will Smith ever needed a double to do flash backs, he should call Eugene.

“Why are you bringing that whole thing back up?” Bob slapped Eugene over the head lightly. “Do you know how long it took him to stop rambling around it?”

“Who are you telling? I have thirty-seven messages complaining about it,” Eugene added. “Just making sure I didn’t miss anything.”

“Everything is back to normal,” said Constantine. “The threat was removed. But speaking of threat, I need to know the truth. You know I don’t trust your horseman. Are you still dealing Ecstasy in my city?”

“God no,” Eugene admitted. “Death went full wrath on the Mistress, and we stepped away from that business.”

“Where are they getting it from?” Bob asked.

“Getting what?” Eugene asked.

“Didn’t you get Bartholomew’s message?” Constantine asked this time.

“That he needed backup to head to the Cave, yes.” Eugene patted his messenger bag. “That is why I’m here. Ready for tropical night with the devil.”

“What about the rest of the message?” Bob urged.

“There was more?” Eugene pulled out his phone and found his text. “Ooops.”

““Ooops?”” said Constantine.

“Yeah, I didn’t read the rest,” Eugene confessed. “I read Cave and pretty much left the lab.”

Bob and Constantine glared at Eugene in silence. Eugene raised his hands to clarify.

“In my defense, it’s flu season.”

“So?” Bob answered for the duo.

Eugene dropped his head to rest on the chair. “How many variations of the flu can we actually make? In the last four years, I have made at least eight. It’s so boring. This was a great excuse to escape while I still had my mind. Fifth is testing some combination of chickenpox and the Spanish flu.”

Bob shook his head. It still blew his mind how narcissistic Pestilence was. She refused to learn the names of her interns. Instead, they were labeled based on the number of decades they had been in her service. Eugene was still considered the Rookie of the team. Days like this were a reminder of how grateful he was to work for Death.

“That sounds awful,” Bob admitted.

“Tell me about,” said Eugene. “But if he does perfect it, it will bring us millions. Not a bad day at the Pestilence lab.”

“I keep forgetting that you are all in the business of killing humanity,” Bob reminded Eugene.

“We work for Pestilence. What do you think we do?”

“Why doesn’t that bother you?” Bob pushed a little harder.

“I see it as the circle of life,” Eugene replied. “We just help the circle move a little faster. Then I stopped thinking about it because it gets pretty depressing. What do you want me to test?”

“Give it up, Bob, they are all brainwashed,” Constantine explained. “It’s a necessary evil to work for the horsemen. I’m sure they feel the same about us.”

“We just threatened to wipe an entire clan of shifters if they didn’t behave,” Bob reminded himself. “I guess we are not much better.”

“Exactly,” said Constantine.

“That explains the angry guests,” Eugene nodded. “Now back to me.”

“Of course,” said Constantine.

“We have three dead bodies we found in the last three days,” Bob filled him in. “One had traces of Ecstasy.”

“Not mine,” said Eugene quickly.

“You already told us that,” Bob pointed out. “But could you see where it came from?”

“I should be able to,” Eugene said. “Bring me a sample of all three and I can compare to see if the others have any as well.”

“We can absolutely get you those samples as well,” Bob confirmed, pulling out his phone to make the call.

“Now, where are we going and when do we go?” Eugene asked, his smile a little too bright for Bob’s taste.

“You and Constantine need to find the location for the Cave,” said Bob. “I need to head back to the Station for those samples and check on the team.”

“We can make that happen,” said Eugene, saluting.

“Please be careful tonight,” Bob told him. “Don’t have too much fun, and come back alive.”

“Have faith in me. I got this.”

Bob wasn’t sure what else to say. Eugene was an amazing scientist, but clubs and music had a way of distracting the young man. At least he was immune to any form of poison, including alcohol. Nobody could drug him and take advantage of him. He wasn’t immune to bullets, and that made Bob very nervous. But he was going with Bartholomew. Between the two of them they should be good. At least Bob hoped.

Chapter Seventeen



It was rare for Nikita to commit to do a job on a weekday. There were too many variables to be considered, like the lack of people in town. But according to her research, her mark was going to be at the Whiskey River Club on the Arkansas side for a special Halloween concert. She didn't pay too much attention to who the live band was going to be there. That was not her concern. A packed club with a bunch of drunk people was exactly what she needed, and the reason she left her comfy couch with the latest season of *Wednesday* on hold.

"Thank you so much," Nikita told the incredibly nice and professional Uber driver, an older lady with an impeccable SUV.

"Sweetie, take my card." The driver gave her a metallic-blue business card. "If you need a ride back, send me a text."

"How late are you running?" Nikita asked, collecting the card.

"Normally, on weeknights, I'm done by nine," she explained. "But concert nights are great for business, and it makes me feel better to know girls in town have a safe option to get home. I do runs all the way until three."

"That is good to know," Nikita replied. "I was concerned and planned on leaving early to be on the safe side. Reason I'm here at seven."

"Well, if you don't find your friend, you got my number, Ms. Janet."

"Thank you so much, Ma'am." Nikita climbed out of the Uber and waved at the driver.

She pulled her phone out and added an extra fifty to the tip. If everything went according to plan, she wouldn't need the ride. But female entrepreneurs held a soft spot in her heart, and she always enjoyed helping them. Well, maybe not Nikita, but Janet Smith was a supporter of the arts and hard-working people.

Nikita took a quick look at her reflection on her phone and winked at herself. Her eyelash extensions made her eyes look bigger, making the blue of her irises pop even more. With her hair in a tight ponytail, tight jeans that showed off every curve she had, four-inch heels and a cut-off V neck, she knew she could stop traffic. Granted, hot blondes were a staple in Texas.

Adjusting the ladies one more time, she exhaled. It had been years since she had seen her mark. Roy. They never had the pleasure of meeting, something Nikita rejoiced. Roy was known as a notorious player with a bad temper. Getting his attention shouldn't be too hard. She really wanted to be home by ten and finish her show.

Two men walked past her on their way to the club, each giving her discreet looks as they walked by. Nikita smiled, and they tipped their cowboy hats at her. She was appreciating the tight jeans all the men in the area wore when out on the town. It had never occurred to her how much detail men were hiding with loose jeans. She gave herself a little shake and concentrated on her task.

A few feet behind the gentlemen, she walked into the club. It was a nice size establishment for the small town and filling up fast. Nikita paid the charge at the door, and the friendly girl placed a wrist band on her.

Nikita made her way towards the bar and ordered a tequila sour. Drink in hand, titties at attention, and lips as bright red as possible, she was sending signals for all the dumb drunks to talk to her. She strolled towards the edge of the dance floor and found an empty spot.

Her intel said the dear ole Roy was a big fan of the band. He had made several posts commenting on the concert. If he wasn't in the club, it wouldn't be too long before he arrived, and he better come. Nikita hated wasting time.

For over twenty minutes, she mingled around the club. Accepted several invitations to dance. She was grateful for those dance lessons she took in her youth. Her Two-Step was still perfect. On her way to the bar from the bathroom, she finally spotted him. Roy was a beast, six five, at least three

hundred pounds, built like a lineman, and with the tightest clothes she had ever seen.

Where does he shop? Nikita asked herself, working on relaxing her facial features. *Spanx-R-Us? Are those clothes painted on him?*

While Nikita enjoyed form-fitting clothes, she also enjoyed men with style and taste in their outfits. There was nothing left to the imagination on that man, to include the package the Gods had given him.

Seriously, how can anyone think that guy is human?

He even radiated power. Nothing about him said sweet and innocent. Or friendly and cuddly. Nikita took a deep breath to control her nerves. She wasn't sure if it was fear or excitement, but her pulse rate increased. That was something she could use.

Winking at the bartender, she dropped another twenty in the tip jar. On rare occasions, she played the dumb girl really well. This needed to be one of them. She sipped her drink and sashayed her way towards Roy and the four guys with him.

Maybe it was an accident or maybe her instincts kicked in, but Nikita tripped right in front of the group, spilling her drink all over her shirt.

"Easy there." Roy grabbed her before she face-planted on the floor.

"Oh God," Nikita whispered. "I swear, I'm not drunk or this clumsy."

Nikita wiped the drink from her front, giving everyone a better view of her assets.

"Are you okay?" one of the group members asked.

"Yes," Nikita replied, meeting no one's eyes. "I'm so sorry."

"Not a problem," said Roy. "Joey, grab the lady another drink. What are you having?"

"You don't need to do that," said Nikita, but allowed Roy to lead her to an empty table.

"It's my fault," he said.

"How?" Nikita finally looked up at him. The man was at least a foot taller than her.

"I always seem to be in the way," he replied, strong features staring down at her.

He was a handsome one. Defined cheek bones, dark-brown hair, and sexy eyes made him a sight to remember. Too bad people wanted him dead.

"Hopefully you don't do that on purpose." Nikita played with her hair.

One of the group members brought Nikita some paper towels, and she took them graciously. The one named Joey rushed back with her drink.

“The bartender said you were drinking a Tequila Sour. Hope that’s okay?” Joey handed her the drink.

“Thank you,” she told him.

“My pleasure, ma’am,” he said and moved to the side.

Nikita found herself in the center of the group, with Roy’s buddies flanking them. On second thought, they didn’t look like buddies at all, but more like security.

Why would a man this big need backup?

Nikita pondered the situation, then did an internal slap of herself.

Duh, girl, she chastised herself. Because of people like yourself trying to kill him. If Rebecca wants him dead, it means others do, too. The daughter of a powerful kingpin has connections.”

The first act took the stage, and they weren’t bad. Maybe not great, but the crowd loved them. It probably had something to do with all the drinks everyone was consuming. At the end of the act, Nikita asked to be excused.

“I need some fresh air,” she told Roy, who had made himself very comfortable around her waist.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, I think I drank too much.” Nikita removed herself from his grasp and stumbled her way toward the front door.

Roy followed, making sure she didn’t trip again. He waved his security away and kept up with the drunk woman. Outside, the night had turned chilly, and Nikita embraced the fresh air. She moved to the side of the club and leaned against the building.

“Do you need anything?” Roy asked, concern in his eyes.

Nikita wasn’t sure if it was genuine or not, but it didn’t matter. She had work to do.

“I’m good now,” she said. “Probably time for me to head home.”

“But you are going to miss the band,” he informed her.

“I’m sure it’s not the only time they will be in town.”

“It will be for a few years,” he said. “They just signed a major record deal and are getting ready to blow up. This is probably the last time they will play venues like this.”

“So, you wouldn’t take me home?” Nikita ran her hand slowly down his chest towards his groin.

“I would absolutely take you home,” he said, leaning down to kiss her. “Just not right now.”

“But I don’t feel good.” She bit down on her lip, only inches from his face.

“I have been waiting weeks for this concert. I’m not missing it,” he informed her. “You can . . .”

Nikita interrupted his speech by wrapping her hands over his head and kissing him. It took Roy a moment to react, then embraced her back, pinning her against the wall. The kiss was long and passionate. Nikita was the first one to break the kiss. She held his gaze and used her powers to take control of his mind.

“Time to go, little pup,” she quirked.

Roy struggled against her power.

“Now.” She forced more of her will into his mind.

“What the . . .?” Roy reeled back against the assault and slammed Nikita against the wall with his full force.

The impact broke her concentration, and she dropped to the ground.

“What the fuck are you?” Roy screamed, pulling his foot back to kick Nikita in the face.

“Hey, dude!” A tall guy with sandy-blond hair pulled Roy off Nikita. “What the hell do you think you are doing?”

“I . . . don’t know . . . what came over me,” Roy stuttered and pushed away from the guy. “My head.”

Holding his head, Roy stumbled away from the man and Nikita’s body on the ground. He rushed back inside, not looking around.

“Are you okay, ma’am?” asked the newcomer, reaching to help her up.

“I had that under control,” Nikita snapped.

“Did you now?” he asked once she was on her feet. “I basically didn’t just save your ass from getting smashed by that beast of a man?”

Nikita took in her rescuer and placed her hands on her hips. He was a little shorter than six feet, with broad shoulders and a thin waist. Perfect complexion with hazel eyes that reflected the surrounding light. Letting her senses take him in fully, she noticed he was also a werewolf.

“Do you make it a habit to be chivalrous to every person you see?”

“Only those getting beat up by people twice their size,” he told her with a smirk. “The name is Will. And my grandmother would be terribly disappointed if I let ladies get pommeled to the ground by assholes.”

“Well, Will, aren’t you the sweet one?” she said. “Thanks.”

“Are you planning to head inside? You aren’t dating that guy?”

“I think I had plenty of fun for one night. And no, I’m not dating him or probably ever will after tonight.” Nikita pulled out her phone. “I’ll get an Uber and head back home.”

“You are getting an Uber here?”

“Yes!” Nikita glared at Will. “Do you have something against Ubers as well?”

“Texarkana is not known for having many Uber drivers,” he informed her. “Do you need a ride?”

“In your opinion, I’ll be much safer with a total stranger that I just met in a parking lot, or a total stranger that works at dropping people off for a living. Is that correct?”

“But at least I just saved you from getting beat up?”

“Which I had completely under control,” Nikita reminded him, but Will shook his head. “You seriously can’t possibly be this nice.”

“I’m not,” Will confessed. “But I really don’t want to go inside and listen to those assholes. Giving you a ride home gives me a reason to bail.”

“Why are you going?”

“A bunch of family friends are there.” He made hand gestures, trying to explain.

“If you don’t like the band, why did you come?”

“I kind of agreed to come out before I knew who was playing.” He stuck his hands in his pockets. “Let’s just say there is some bad blood between us.”

“Bad blood, like you were in the band and they dropped you?”

Will didn’t reply, and Nikita screamed in delight, covering her mouth with her hands.

“That was a wild guess, and the fact that it’s true is even better.” She giggled. “Well, Will, as long as I get all the dirty details, you have a deal.”

“Wait.” Will raised his hands. “That’s not what I agreed to.”

“Now you do.” She wrapped her arms in his and led them away from the building. “Jasmine is the name. What are you driving?”

“Why do I have the feeling this is more than what I bargained for?” But he pointed to a black F250 in the back of the parking lot.

“Don’t be a sissy,” she teased him. “Tell me everything.”

Nikita smiled brightly at the man. Maybe the night would not be a total loss after all. If she remembered the file from Mickey, this Will was the grandson of the matriarch of the Coleman clan. A very interesting turn of events for her.

They reached the truck, and Will opened the door for Nikita. Nikita glanced between the truck and Will.

“Is everyone in this town so old-fashioned?” she asked softly.

“First you accused me of chivalry and now of being old-fashioned,” Will told her. “Have you never met a gentleman in your life?”

Nikita thought for a long moment and shook her head. “Nope.”

“Woman, where do you come from?”

“Every time a man has opened the door for me, they want something.”

“Maybe for you to stop mean-mugging them.” Will pointed at the vehicle and Nikita rolled her eyes.

“You are not as cute as you think you are,” she informed him.

“Thank God all I’m doing is dropping you off. I would hate for you to get the wrong impression.”

“Maybe people in this town are just too trusting,” she added.

“Or you might need better friends.” Will closed the door and walked around to his side.

“Fine.” Nikita batted her eyelashes. “If I’m nicer, would you tell me the story?”

Will chuckled. “That won’t work with me, and I already agreed to tell you. Where to, Ms. Jasmine? And please don’t make me regret this.”

Nikita smiled, knowing he would absolutely regret it, but it was too late to save him. In the end, they were all the same.

Chapter Eighteen



Eugene played with the digital dashboard in the Lexus while Bartholomew drove down I-30. Unlike most men who had strict rules about people playing with their radios, Bartholomew couldn't care less. He was pretty amused by how excited Eugene was with the car.

"She is a beauty," Eugene told him for the fifth time.

"How is it possible after all these years I didn't know you were a car guy?"

"Isn't everyone?" Eugene told him with a smug expression.

"No," Bartholomew replied. "It makes very little difference to me."

"Yet, you now own a work of art sports car." Eugene rubbed the red-and-black leather interior of the Lexus. "For a non-car kind of guy, this is a hell of a ride."

"In a house of car people, you can't be driving a Pinto."

"Hey, I kind of like that car," Eugene complained. "It's like a muscle car."

"Right, only if you were a suburban mom and that was your idea of a muscle car." Bartholomew cut between two eighteen-wheelers who were racing each other on the road. "Why don't you just get a new company car?"

"Are you kidding me?" Eugene adjusted the AC vents again. "Lose the hearse? That would be uncivilized."

"What was I thinking?" Bartholomew nodded, not sure what was wrong with Pestilence's interns. "I'm assuming it's for the same reason you always build your labs underneath chicken plants."

“Exactly, it’s a tradition.” Eugene wiggled in his seat and gasped.

“What?”

“Did you know these seats come with a massage function? For the Gods, this is amazing.” The young man lounged on the seat and relaxed. “This is the way to travel.”

Bartholomew chuckled. “You are really enjoying the car. Why don’t you get one yourself? It’s not like you all don’t make a fortune?”

“And put it where? Next to the undercover entrance. The rest of the guys would laugh at me.”

“You can always leave it at Reapers and use it on the weekends when you come over.” Bartholomew found their exit, the one to TexAmerica and pulled off the interstate.

He glanced to the side and found Eugene staring at him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Are you serious?”

“About?”

“Letting me keep a car at Reapers?” Eugene leaned in, holding his breath.

“Yes, why not?” Bartholomew maneuvered between the large trucks parked on the access road and headed towards their destination. “Constantine has a Camaro that he can’t even drive. Why wouldn’t we keep your car? We can get you a Lexus.”

“Forget that!” Eugene shouted. “I’m getting the Jag F-Type R75 coupe in a candy-apple-red convertible, of course.”

“For a guy who couldn’t get a car, you are super specific on the one you want,” Bartholomew pointed out.

“Listen, the option hadn’t been on the table because of the Mistress, but now that I can, I’m getting my dream one.”

Bartholomew was amazed Pestilence still made her interns called her Mistress. Even after the many lectures she received from Death. Some things would never change, like that horseman not being an evil one.

“Let me transfer you the money, since I can’t technically order it myself,” Eugene continued.

“Transfer what money?”

“For the Jag, of course.” Eugene faced his friend.

“I said we were going to get you one, not that you were going to pay for it.” Bartholomew crossed the intersection and drove cautiously into the Red River industrial park.

“What? Have you lost your mind? The base model for that car, and I don’t want just the base model in case you were wondering, starts at least at one hundred fifteen thousand dollars. There is no way I can let you pay for that.”

Bartholomew turned to face his friend. “Why not?”

“Because that’s a ridiculous amount of money.”

Bartholomew parked in front of an old deserted army barracks. Two other sport cars were already there.

“Eugene, you can’t be serious.” Bartholomew adjusted his Cuban shirt. “I’m Death’s son, and Constantine’s heir, who has more money than most organized religions in the world put together. Do you realize how much I’m worth?” Bartholomew took another long breath, his features going solemn. “Constantine and I will have an eternity to continue to accumulate more money, but I will only get a few dozen years with the people I love before they move on. Why wouldn’t I spend the money?”

Eugene’s eyes widened and he struggled to find words.

“Besides,” Bartholomew continued in a more cheerful voice. “Compared to the number of state-of-the-art trucks we have bought that have gone up in flames, one Jag is nothing.”

“Well, in that case, don’t forget to get the red rims that go with it and the sound system.”

Bartholomew laughed and pointed to the building in front of them. “Got it. We are here.”

“Why do they keep picking locations that could get us arrested for their secret entrance?” Eugene scanned the parking lot for any federal officers to rush from the Army Depot to tackle them to the ground.

“Because it’s the devil,” Bartholomew reminded him. “If you are willing to go into his club, you should take the risk of going to jail in this world.”

“Bob is right. You can’t trust Jake.”

“I hope you weren’t planning to trust Lucifer, Eugene?” Bartholomew stared at his friend.

“He is always so smooth.”

“I’m telling Isis you need an intervention.” Bartholomew pointed a finger at him.

“Please.” Eugene rubbed his hair down one last time before opening his door. “Pestilence owns my ass and soul. He would be damned if he even tried to make me an offer. My master is a very jealous one.”

Bartholomew couldn't argue with that fact. He followed Eugene out of the car and headed towards the front of the old two-story barracks. They looked like extras on the set of Miami Vice or Bad Boys. Bartholomew wasn't sure which was worse.

There wasn't a soul in sight, but out of thin air, Adam, Jake's main bouncer, stepped in front of the door.

"Good evening, gentlemen," purred Adam.

Adam was wearing a Dior Homme light-blue wool tuxedo with matching Dior shoes, that Bartholomew was sure cost at least seven grand for the ensemble. If Jake could pass for a model, his squad of demons and the rest of his crew were the epitome of perfection. Even Michelangelo's David would be jealous of this lot. Thank God Bartholomew understood the price they paid. Damnation for all eternity was not worth looking that good. Not that Death hadn't taken care of his looks as well.

"Good evening, Adam," replied Eugene, handing the bouncer their invitations.

"Business or pleasure?" asked Adam, as he inspected both of the envelopes.

"Have any of the horsemen's interns ever come here on pleasure?" Bartholomew replied.

Adam merely chuckled. "Good point, my young Reaper. We have a little change in theme for the night."

"What?" Eugene gasped, running his hands over his shirt. "I picked this specific for tropical night."

"You should be fine," Adam replied. "We are doing ballroom dancing. Have a few special guests that requested the theme."

"Can you do that?" Bartholomew asked.

"Only if you have enough money or souls to give to the boss," Adam explained. "This group had both."

"This can't be good," Bartholomew added. "Maybe we should come back another time."

"It will be fine," Eugene told him. "We have one question for the big-guy. It will be quick."

"Enter at your own peril," Adam told them, pulling the red-velvet curtain back.

Bartholomew analyzed the fabric, sure that thing was not there when they first arrived. "If we die, Constantine is going to be pissed."

“Then make sure not to die,” said Adam.

Eugene pulled him inside, and Adam closed the curtain behind them.



The Cave was not a traditional club. For starters, it was owned and run by the Devil, so that alone made it hard to replicate. It also wasn't located in any specific location. It was more like a pocket dimension you entered from anywhere in the world, by invitation only. Only those who knew where to find it could enter. Unlike most clubs, not only the theme changed but also the entire decor of the place.

Adam wasn't just a bouncer, but his approval was crucial to proceed to the party. If the man, Bartholomew was sure he was a man but he couldn't confirm it, did not like your outfit, you were not entering. It didn't matter how powerful or rich you thought you were. But who was going to complain? It wasn't like the Devil filed his club with the Better Business Bureau.

“Do you think Adam is like the first Adam?” Bartholomew whispered as he descended the velvety stairs.

“I wondered the same thing, but haven't dared to ask,” Eugene replied over his shoulder.

“It's probably safer if we don't,” Bartholomew added.

“I agree.”

They reached the bottom, which was at least four flights down, and stood in front of another set of velvet curtains.

“Is there any reason Jake doesn't install an elevator here?” Bartholomew complained. “I mean, he has doors scattered all over the world and we have to climb to the pits just to get in.”

“I figured he just wants to build up the anticipation,” explained Eugene.

“Or he is hoping a few of the clients die from the exercise and he avoids paying us the delivery fee,” Bartholomew joked, and Eugene chuckled.

“That would be something the Devil would do.” Eugene reached for the curtains and asked, “Are you ready?”

“Been ready. Let's get this over with.”

As Eugene pulled the curtains to one side, Bartholomew held his breath. The place resembled an enormous cathedral, like the Sistine Chapel. The

ceiling was massively decorated with cherubs and other angels.

“Do you think God would strike him down for those murals?” Bartholomew asked, barely moving his lips.

“I would not be surprised, but who is going to tell him?” Eugene replied in the same fashion. “I’m not even looking up, so I’m not used as a witness.”

“Good idea.”

They stepped through the threshold, and magic washed over them. Instead of tropical Cuban shirts and slacks, their clothes transformed into tuxedos, tails, and all.

“Nice,” said Eugene.

“Nobody can ever blame the devil for not having style,” stated Bartholomew.

As they admired the drastically different clothes, a body dropped from the air in front of them and kept on falling. Bartholomew’s head snapped in front and froze. The dance floor of the cathedral was floating. Each set of tiles, the size of a large coffee table, moved up and down with the beat of the music. Couples jumped up and down between tiles as they waltzed their way around.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Bartholomew stared at the scene, dumbfounded. “Where is Jake?”

“In the center.” Eugene pointed to the middle of the floor where a stationary bar stood, with the devil sipping his drink, watching the mess.

“Who in their right mind requested this fiasco?”

“Elves?” Eugene pointed at a pair of elves dancing their way across the room, almost floating from tile to tile.

“It figures,” Bartholomew mumbled. “Remind me to tell Isis that her boyfriend’s people are a bunch of assholes.”

“I’m sure she already knows that. But what are we waiting for?”

On cue, several large blades spun in the air from both the ceiling and the floor around the bar area. A couple of the dancers screamed as the blades sliced their skin.

“That!” Bartholomew finally answered. “Jake would not make it easy to reach him. While he entertained the change in theme, he would make the rich fools pay for his attention.”

“Because the floating dance floor wasn’t bad enough.” Eugene leaned over to peer over the edge of the floor. “I don’t see a ground down there.”

“I would bet you lunch it ends in hell,” Bartholomew wagered. “Let’s avoid falling.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“When do we start?” Bartholomew couldn’t figure out how to jump onto the floor.

“Let’s wait for this song to end.” Eugene moved closer to the edge.

“What are you doing?” Bartholomew followed.

“It would be very impolite to cut in while the song is playing,” Eugene explained. “I have a feeling we need to treat this like a ballroom competition and wait our turn.”

“Eugene, I have never competed.” Bartholomew rubbed his hands down his pants. Dying in a dance off was not how he wanted to go. That would be more embarrassing than he cared to admit.

“Relax. Keep your eyes open for flying blades and follow my lead.”

“Says the king of ballroom.”

Eugene never had time to reply as the music changed to a Latin Salsa.

“Perfect,” Eugene announced. “You can dance to this alone. Keep both feet and hands moving to the beat.”

“Jesus, take the wheel, or my feet.” Bartholomew prayed to himself and laughed. He was praying to Jesus while dancing across a deadly floor to speak with the devil. There was something insane about all of it.

The moment Eugene started dancing, the tile in front of him floated. He did a quick turn and jumped on it. Bartholomew stopped his rational mind from thinking and began the eight-count dance that made up the basic salsa steps. As he moved front and back, the tile to his left moved. Following Eugene’s lead, he stepped onto his own tile.

The dance floor was the strangest obstacle course Bartholomew had ever encountered. It was as if the Mario brothers merged with *Tetris* and had *Dance Revolution* in the background. You had to keep dancing your way to the edge of the tile, because if you stopped, the tile turned on its side and dropped you off. Once you reached the edge, you took a leap, while in step, to the next tile to get closer to the target. On several occasions, Bartholomew landed on tiles occupied by single dancers. Ignoring the new partner was not an option or you would both be knocked off.

“We need to hurry,” Eugene screamed from three tiles over.

“What?”

“If we don’t make it before the song is over, we will need to start all over.”

“Damn it.” Bartholomew spun his new partner around twice before waving away and jumping to a passing tile. “It’s never easy with the devil.”

Swallowing his fear of looking foolish on the dance floor, he picked up his pace. Eugene was floating across the floor, four tiles ahead. He was a natural. Bartholomew was not too far behind. He had forced Isis to give him dancing lessons just for this type of situation. Floating dance floors was not something they practiced. As he made his way to the next tile, a body jumped behind him on his tile.

Bartholomew saw the figure from the corner of his eye. It took Bart only a second to register what was happening. The figure was dancing his way towards him with a blade. Spinning around on three counts, Bartholomew pulled out his scythe and blocked the blade.

“Hey!” he shouted, but the dancer was dead.

Well, not totally dead. More of a well-dressed zombie with great dancing skills.

“There is no way I get out danced by a zombie,” Bartholomew told the walking-dead, as they *salsa* their way around the tile swinging blows at each other.

“Stop playing!” Eugene shouted. “Song is almost over. Get over here.”

Bartholomew spun around to find Eugene at the bar next to Jake. The devil waved at the young Reaper, who ducked in time to avoid the zombie’s blade. Eugene was right, and the salsa was picking up speed as it reached the end of the crescendo. Bartholomew was running out of time. Instead of ducking the attack, he rushed at the zombie and grabbed him by the waist. Spinning them both around, he leaped off his tile.

In mid-air, he dropped the zombie and flew to the next one. Picking up his speed, he danced his way across three other tiles, using his scythe as a pole and adding some very interesting moves to the routine. As the song ended, he landed next to Eugene by the bar.

“What was that?” Eugene asked, pointing at the dance floor.

“Pole dancing is a thing,” Bartholomew explained.

“Yes, but not with Salsa.” Eugene crossed his arms, offended.

“Well, it is now.” Bartholomew walked around his friend and chugged the drink that was on the bar.

“I thought we should drink nothing we were given here?” Eugene changed topic and rushed to Bartholomew's side.

“Humans and the living should drink nothing from the Cave.” Bartholomew asked the bartender for two more. “I’m a Reaper.”

Letting out a long breath, Bartholomew leaned against the bar and watched the dancers engaged in a very competitive tango.

“This is too much work for just a talk,” said Bartholomew. “I’m ordering me a Vakra when I get home.”

“What’s that?” asked Eugene, crouching in front of the drinks that were set in front of them.

“A curved blade from the Zombie Tools company, because it seems you never know when you could run into a zombie.” Bartholomew pointed over his shoulder.

“Why do you have zombies on the floor?” Eugene leaned back and asked the devil.

Jake smiled as he watched the dancers fight for their lives with the undead. His hair was dark for the evening, in perfect spikes that glittered when he moved. He wore dark Dolce & Gabbana sunglasses that matched the same brand suit.

“Maybe the devil does wear Prada,” said Bartholomew from behind.

“Prada, Dolce, and Gucci, my friend,” said Jake. “I’m a brand-ho. I love them all. Now, back to the zombies.” Jake pointed with his cup. “The elves want to pretend to be all holy and special but come to the Cave to engage their primitive nature. I have no issues taking their money and time but won’t sacrifice my kids for their fancy.”

“So, you bring zombies to battle with them?” Eugene recapped.

“Not just zombies. Their dead.” Jake smirked and both Bartholomew and Eugene slowly turned to face the floor. “Let’s see how easy it is to kill your own, even if they are dead.”

“That is some twisted shit,” said Bartholomew. “Reason two hundred and thirty-seven, why messing with the devil would end badly for you.”

“So true,” said Jake. “Speaking of deals, why are you two here?”

“You said I had an open invitation,” Eugene stated.

“You do.” Jake took another sip from his drink. “But interns only visit when they want something. I never get random courtesy calls.”

“That’s because Isis said we can’t come and play,” Eugene admitted.

“She is smart for such a young girl.” Jake replied.

“Don’t tell her that,” Bartholomew told him.

Jake laughed, and the best set of white teeth sparkled in the light. Bartholomew chugged another drink as Eugene continued to analyze his.

“Well, back to business,” said Bartholomew.

“Let me hear it,” Jake told him with a hint of a smile on his face.

“Are any of your cults doing sexual sacrifices in Haven for Halloween?”

Jake stopped drinking and lowered his sunglasses. “Are you kidding me?”

“I didn’t dance my way through that to joke.” Bartholomew tapped the bar.

“My people are busy, but not in that capacity, at least in Haven,” Jake answered once he realized Bartholomew wasn’t joking.

“Are any of your people involved?” Bartholomew pushed the subject. “You like to give them free rein to do crazy things.”

“After the little fiasco they made a few years ago,” said Jake, standing up straighter. “Nobody gets to do anything without my permission.”

“Did you find your traitor?” Eugene asked as he smelled the drink.

“I rule Hell. Everyone is a traitor if you are not careful.” Jake put his glasses back on and turned his attention to the floor. “Unlike the witches, I don’t search for traitors. I just wipe out all potential oppositions. Takes less time.”

“A lot more efficient,” Eugene agreed.

Bartholomew slapped his friend on the shoulder, making Eugene stop analyzing his drink.

“Basically, you have nothing to do with deaths in haven?” Bartholomew summarized for them.

“Not this time.” Jake shook his head. “Why do I get the blame for everything?”

“Because you are the devil,” Eugene reminded him. “You and your people are pretty busy causing mayhem.”

“We are good at that, but I can’t take credit for it.” Jake gave them a small shrug. “But once you find them, please make sure to deliver them to me personally.”

“How do you know they are coming to you?” Eugene asked.

“All humans have about the same concept of right and wrong, even if their moral compass is twisted.” Jake took his drink again. “Killing each

other automatically gives them a one-way ticket to my realm. Can't wait to meet this new soul."

"You and Death can handle those details," Bartholomew informed him. He was glad it was not his responsibility to deliver the souls. "Now, how do we get out?"

"You don't want to dance your way out?" Jake pointed to the floor.

"I'd rather skip the hypocritical elves," confessed Bartholomew.

"Me, too," Jake agreed, pretty impressed. "Just for that, I'll let you use my exit. Cain, would you let these gentlemen out, please?"

"Yes, sir," the bartender replied, as he wiped his hands with a towel.

"Do come and visit again, maybe next time for pleasure." Jake waved at them and turned around to face the dance floor and the battles going on.

Bartholomew pulled Eugene by the sleeves behind the bar. Cain waited patiently. Underneath the countertop, a small door was open that led downstairs.

"We are going to get back up, going down?" asked Eugene, but Bartholomew pushed him through.

"Thanks, my man," Bartholomew told him, placing a gold coin in his hand.

"Thank you, sir, come back anytime," said Cain, as he placed the coin in his mouth to test the consistency of the gold.

The door closed behind them, leaving them in darkness. Bartholomew pulled out his phone. There was no service, but at least the flashlight worked.

"I think he is trying to get rid of us and send us to hell," Eugene whined.

"Considering everyone knows we are here, I doubt it," replied Bartholomew. "Just keep walking and see where this leads."

Five steps later, Eugene stopped in front of a door. Bartholomew looked over his shoulder and frowned.

"Now what?" asked Eugene.

"Well, we can't stay here and I'm not going back, so open the door." Bartholomew pushed him forward.

"Pestilence protect us," Eugene prayed, and Bartholomew slapped his face.

Before Eugene had time to think, Bartholomew shoved him out the door and followed quickly behind. They were standing ten feet away from the

ground entrance to the old barracks. Bartholomew scanned the parking lot and Lexi was still parked exactly where he left her.

“Really?” Eugene asked. “We climbed four flights of stairs to get there and took five steps down and here we are. What kind of madness is this?”

“No idea, but we can ponder it on our way home.” Bartholomew marched to his car without looking back.

“The devil is really not my favorite,” said Eugene as he joined Bartholomew next to Lexi.

“Well, that’s a blessing.”

Bartholomew climbed into his vehicle, annoyed at the waste of time the evening had been. It also meant they had no leads, three dead bodies, and one day before Halloween. The odds were just getting worse.

Chapter Nineteen



Bob paced his office, reading over reports.

“How did I miss this?” he asked himself for the fifth time.

Abby rushed in with another cup of coffee but didn’t say a thing to her boss. Bob waved but continued to pace. He made two laps around the small pace, bumping into his chair when he finally stopped.

“Abby,” he shouted.

“Yes, boss,” she replied from outside the office.

Bob glanced up and stared at the young lady holding a large notebook and wearing a knee-high dress, with a turtleneck and boots. He wondered if she ever wore jeans to the office.

“Were you standing by the door?” he asked instead.

“Just waiting to see if you needed anything,” she replied. She raised her notebook, ready for action.

“Do I look that bad?” he asked, lowering the files from his face.

“Not bad,” she replied, looking around the office. “Stressed.”

Bob stopped and scanned his office as well. He had files all over the place. His vest was on the floor, and he had spilled coffee in a corner. This was not like him. He was normally the immaculate one on the team.

“I’m losing my mind,” he told her.

“You just take on a lot, and keep your worries to yourself,” Abby shared.

“It’s because I’m the intern,” Bob defended himself.

“Didn’t you used to yell at Isis for doing the same?” Shorty asked from the door.

“Have you been listening in?” Bob asked.

“You have everyone walking on eggshells, my man, with all this pacing you’ve been doing,” Shorty informed him. “This is not like you.”

Bob sat at the edge of his desk and took a long breath. “We have several reports of missing shifters, and I missed it.” He dropped the folders on his desk. “There are so many reports coming in that the crazy ones are missed with our everyday domestic disputes.”

“What do you want us to do?” Shorty asked. “It’s not like any of us have any experience in running a police station, never mind a city.”

Abby slowly raised her hand.

“Abby, you can speak without raising your hand,” Bob told her.

“Sorry.” She quickly dropped her hand. “Have you considered starting an amber alert or something like that?”

“Like the messages you see on I-30 when kids go missing?” Shorty asked.

“They have messages for kids, and now elderly as well,” Abby explained. “But they are also text messages. I get them all the time. You don’t get them?”

Bob and Shorty both shook their heads.

“That doesn’t mean much,” said Bob. “Bartholomew is the one that set up our phones, so I’m sure he found a way to block anything he deemed unnecessary.”

“Maybe he can set something up,” Abby said cheerfully. “Sounds like something he could easily do.”

“That is very true,” Shorty added. “That way, everyone can be on the lookout for those people.”

“I like it.” Bob nodded, allowing his breathing to go back to normal. “Let’s add that to the agenda for the next staff meeting.”

“When is our next staff meeting?” Shorty asked.

“Friday,” Abby told him.

“The day after Halloween?” It was Shorty’s turn to pace.

“Why are you doing that?” Bob asked, watching his friend.

“Just trying to see how it feels,” Shorty told him with a smirk. “Way too much work. But I recommend we cancel the staff meeting. We have everyone on mandatory overtime for the holiday. I can call the Bart-Man and explain the situation.”

"I'm seriously hating Halloween," said Bob. "But we have court in a few."

"I can do it," Abby volunteered, raising her hand.

"Great idea, Abby," Shorty told her. "Teamwork."

"This could work," Bob agreed. "Abby, give Bartholomew a call and explain the situation."

"Yes, boss." She ran out of the room to accomplish her task.

"We need like ten of her," Bob told Shorty.

"She is good."

"Now about court?"

"We think we have a solution for that as well," Shorty announced, rubbing his hands together.

"We?"

"Come with me, my friend." Shorty pointed to the door. "We need a meeting of the minds."

Bob followed Shorty out of the office and down the side stairwell to the main floor. The main foyer of the Station was deserted. Bob spun around in circles and gasped.

"What happened to all the people?"

"Did you know the courtroom has a backdoor?" Shorty asked.

"A what?"

"Exactly? There is an entire entrance to that main area from the back," Shorty explained. "Nothing is getting done during the week, because of the line of people waiting to complain about who knows what, or just come to start a fight. Well, they can wait outside, in the back, away from the human eyes and ours."

"Is that area secure?" Bob spun around, taking in the change. The receptionist at the front desk was peacefully answering the phone without screaming to be heard. It was surreal.

"Renovations have to be made to bring it up to our code, but it will work," Shorty informed him. "The best part, once summer comes, and it's one hundred degrees in the sun, only the people with true issues will hang around."

"Now that's evil," said Bob.

"Pete is working with the dwarfs to start that construction over the weekend," Shorty told him as they moved past the reception area toward the

staff offices. "We like the changes to the court hours, but we would like to take it a little further."

"I'm listening." Bob followed calmly behind.

"Let's change the hours to Monday, Wednesday, and Friday." Shorty held the door open for Bob. "Only three days with fewer hours. Like the government."

"Don't be a sissy!" The scream hit them as soon as they entered the room.

Shorty and Bob searched the room for the sound of the commotion. In the back by the coffee station, a group of five officers stood around a sweating man. Pete floated around the man, screaming encouragements.

"What is going on here?" Shorty asked.

"Hey, Shorty," Pete said, not looking back.

"Is he okay?" Bob added.

"Boss!" Pete screamed, turning around, and forgetting about the man who cried.

"Oh crap," another of the guys screamed.

Everyone jumped to attention to face Bob.

"At ease, everyone, relax," Bob ordered. "But what is going on and why is Little J crying?"

"I'm okay, boss," said the young man, tears still streaming down his face.

"You are all very aware that hazing is not tolerated here," Bob reminded everyone, ready to reprimand even his top officer.

"It's not hazing." Pete floated closer to Bob. "It's the hot sauce challenge."

"This can't be good," Shorty said, closing his eyes.

"There is this guy from Malta, Texas," Pete started.

"I don't think we need to know," Shorty interrupted him.

"Of all people, I figured you would be all for this," Bob told his friend.

"I'm all for challenges and building team-spirit, but if it's the same guy I'm thinking, this won't end good," Shorty told his friend.

"Is he from Chingon Squeezins?" Pete asked cautiously.

"Yes!" Shorty shouted. "That bastard got me."

"You two slow down and explain," Bob ordered. "And somebody give Little J some water."

"Milk," Shorty corrected him. "Water is not going to do a damn thing."

"That bad?" asked Bob.

"It's worse." Shorty admitted. "But Pete, please explain."

“Well, boss, I ran across an add on Facebook from this local company that makes hot sauce.” Pete placed his hands behind his back as he delivered his lecture. “It seemed like a harmless ad, until he said you could win a case of hot sauce if you tried his Texas Firenado for five minutes without drinking anything.”

“Do I want to know what’s in the Firenado sauce?” Bob inquired.

“You don’t,” Shorty told him. “Let’s just say one ingredient is ghost peppers.”

“Ouch!” Bob raised his hands over his head. “Please tell me you guys haven’t been doing this challenge back here without medical supervision.”

“Who needs a medic?” Angela walked into the office with her hair wrapped in a towel.

“We might need you.” Bob told her. “I’m afraid a few of our team have burned off their taste buds with this sauce.”

“You have hot sauce?” Angela marched quickly towards the group. “What kind of hot sauce?”

“Doc, I wouldn’t recommend . . .” Shorty never finished.

Angela took a chip and dipped it in the sauce, taking a giant scoop. The group held their breath as Angela chewed the chip and swallowed. Everyone waited.

“Damn,” she finally said. “That’s some good sauce. I tasted a hint of The Carolina Reaper’s pepper. It has a kick, and that sweet fire burning down your tongue. Add this baby to some chili, and we are in business.”

Angela took another chip packed with sauce and devoured the thing. She licked her fingers and glanced at the group.

“So, who needs a doctor?” she asked with a smile.

“You do?” Shorty made the statement a question. He placed his hand on her forehead, checking her temperature. “She is not even sweating.”

“My mother used to wash our mouths out with ghost peppers when we talked back at her,” Angela explained, and the group gasped.

“That is horrible,” Bob told her.

“Horrible? It’s cruel and unusual torture,” shouted Pete.

“Mamma is a mean witch,” Angela told them. “But I developed an immunity towards peppers. It’s also the reason I’m only allowed to make desserts for people. My savory dishes can be too hot.”

“Doc,” Pete bowed down to her. “We are officially not worthy. You are the queen.”

The rest of the crew followed his lead, and Angela blushed.

"I can make cookies for everyone, if that's okay," Angela said quickly.

"Are you sure? You are really short staffed," Pete asked.

"It would be my pleasure," Angela smiled warmly. "I miss my kitchen and would love to help as much as I can, since I'll be in the building full time."

"As long as you don't add hot sauce, I'll take the cookies," Little J told her, as he drained the glass of milk his buddy had given him.

"Stop by the hospital later today," Angela told him. "I have something to help with the burn."

"Can I have some, too?" another asked.

"Absolutely," Angela said cheerfully. "Would the Chef mind if I make cookies?"

"On the contrary," Pete explained. "He recently lost his assistant, so any help you can give him will be appreciated."

"Sounds great. I'll check with him later," Angela told them. "I better get ready for work."

She waved at the group and headed out the door.

"That was a surprise," said Bob as the door closed behind Angela.

"I'm never challenging her to a thing," Pete declared. "The doctor is a badass."

"What exactly does she get for winning the challenge?" Bob asked. "Because she won."

"Three hundred dollars and a week off duties," Pete confessed softly.

Shorty laughed. "Sounds like someone better tell the doctor."

"While you are there, you can drop off the rest of the sauce with her," Bob suggested.

"It would be my pleasure," Little J announced.

"Can we get back to work now?" Bob asked. "Court should start soon."

"I have an idea," said Shorty. "How many of these hot sauces do you have left Pete?"

"Three cases, why?"

"I don't want to know." Bob covered his ears and headed out of the staff room. "Meet you in court at nine, Shorty."

"Sounds great," Shorty shouted back.

Bob walked the calm hallways back to his office. With the chaos of the day before gone from the front of the building, his steps were lighter. He

had delegated a lot of the work assignments to Pete and Shorty, as well as the recruitment. Maybe he should make them managers of the building and he could focus on intern work. It was time to concentrate his efforts on the things that only he could do. The team could handle the rest.

Memories of his time in the military flashed through his mind, and he realized leadership was the same everywhere you went. You had to trust your people to do a good job and manage resources. He trusted them but had been micromanaging their actions. Union Station was becoming too big for him to micromanage. It was time to let go, or they would fail. Or worse, he would end up with a heart attack and needing to explain to Death how he killed himself trying to do his job. That would be a horrible conversation to have.

Chapter Twenty



The smell of bacon woke Bartholomew from his comatose state. He dragged himself out of bed and went directly to the kitchen to find the culprit and steal some bacon while he was there.

The bright sunlight coming from the glass window of the loft hit him first, and he covered his face to adjust.

“Why is it so bright?” he whined.

“Maybe because it’s close to ten in the morning,” Isis told him from the kitchen.

Bartholomew’s eye snapped open, and he rushed to his sister. “You’re back!”

Isis embraced him tightly and kissed both his cheeks in greeting. Even being at least four inches taller than she was, he felt like a kid around her. Isis made everything better just by being near him.

“Rough night?” She raised his cheeks to inspect his face.

“I hate the Cave, the Devil, and Elves.”

“That’s a very interesting list for a Wednesday morning.” She guided him towards a chair by the table and helped him sit. “Constantine told me you and Eugene were at the Cave. Tell me about it.”

“It was a giant waste of time.” He slouched down in the chair, propping his legs on the table. “We danced our way across for Jake to say he knew nothing. Really?”

“Did you think you were just going to show up in the first place and get all the answers and be done?” Isis loaded a plate with bacon and placed it in

front of her brother.

“Yes.” He really wanted to add a ‘duh’ to his statement but refrained as Isis shook her head.

“Why do you think I complained so much when I was the intern?” She placed a glass of orange juice next to the plate and a stack of pancakes.

“How long have you been home?” Bartholomew inspected all the food in front of him.

“A couple of hours.”

“Technically, an hour and forty-three minutes,” Constantine said, marching through the kitty door on the front of the loft. “She got bored waiting for you and Eugene to wake up, so she has been baking. She has already forced three chocolate chip muffins on me.”

““Forced?”” Isis laughed from the counter.

“Forced!” Constantine repeated. “I was minding my own business, inspecting my drone upstairs, and she dropped these muffins next to me. It was a bribe so she could tell me all her horrible love problems.”

“You have love problems?” Bartholomew asked in between a mouthful.

“Have I mentioned you are a traitor?” Isis told Constantine. “You are still my trainer and that was supposed to be in confidence.”

“What do I look like, a priest? I’m not required to keep secrets.” Constantine hopped on the table next to Bartholomew. “Besides, I’m prepping you to tell the kid you are leaving again.”

“What?” Crumbs fell from Bartholomew’s mouth.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full, and you stop instigating discontent so early in the morning,” Isis chastised both of them. “But since you are so offended by my issues, I guess you don’t want this bacon.”

“Girl!” Constantine stood on all fours. “You are about to lose an eyeball if you don’t bring that here.”

“Now you want to eat my food.” Isis smirked but dropped another plate full of bacon next to Constantine. “I’m glad you are blessing me by eating my food. Bart, please tell Eugene I left his breakfast in the microwave.”

“You are leaving?” Bartholomew put his fork down and looked at his sister with big puppy eyes.

“Don’t make that face.” She told him and took a seat next to the duo with a large cup of coffee. “I’m gone for the night. Genie is throwing a tea party for Hope at the Elven Court to celebrate Halloween. She is planning to be

here tomorrow, but her father guilted her into being there this week as well.”

“I told you I hated Elves.” Bartholomew crunched another piece of bacon.

“They are not all bad, but all royals are a pain in my neck,” Isis confessed. “The fact that they have multiple courts is even more annoying.”

“If you marry Iason, are you going to move to California?” Bartholomew held his breath as he waited for the answer.

Isis instead choked on her coffee.

“Marriage?”

Constantine rolled with laughter. “Can you see Isis getting married and becoming a princess in the Elven kingdom? Those stuck-up pricks would die.”

“Why? Isis would make a great princess,” Bartholomew defended his sister.

“Let’s slow down on all that,” Isis informed them once she got her breathing under control. “I’m not planning to get married any time soon. And I’m sure Iason is not either, well at least I hope so. But Constantine is right. His people would never let it happen.”

“Is there a rule that he can’t marry a human, or is it because you are a commoner?” Bartholomew was waving his fork around like a spear.

Isis plucked the fork from his hand and placed it back on the plate. “Put that down before you stab us.”

“You know I can take them,” he informed her.

“So can I, remember?” she said softly. “And there lies the problem. It would be fine if I was just a mortal, as his most trusted advisors informed me. Confidentially, of course.” Isis made air quotes as she spoke. “But as a Reaper it would be a tragedy, because I could never bear him offspring.”

“No!” Constantine fell to his side in laughter. “That’s even better. A pregnant Isis with a little Elven baby. Would they have pointy ears? I can’t wait to tell Death.”

“What side are you on, Constantine?” Isis asked.

“Who cares about sides?” he told her. “It would be the first time in history we would ever have a pregnant Reaper. This would be epic.”

“Can you get pregnant?” Bartholomew joined the conversation with a frown on his face.

Isis covered her face. “This conversation just went downhill, quick.”

“Of course, she can,” Constantine answered for all of them. “And you can get females pregnant as well, so avoid that.”

Both Isis and Bartholomew stared at the cat.

“Did you honestly think Death would be so cruel as to make you both sterile?”

“I never thought about it much,” Isis confessed. “Being a changed and all.”

“The process is still the same as humans when it comes to the creation part, except,” Constantine continued in between bacon bites. “With you being Reapers, you can only mate with another supernatural being for reproduction. And you have to will your eggs, of course, for you Bart, sperm, to actually reproduce.”

“Do we really need to be having the Birds and the Bees talk during breakfast?” Bartholomew asked, dropping the fork again.

“I agree with Bart,” Isis told them. “I also don’t get the whole *will* it to happen?”

“It means there is no such thing as an accident for you,” Constantine clarified. “If you are compatible with your mate, and you choose to have an offspring, you make it happen. That simple.”

“Do you have any offspring?” Bartholomew leaned forward towards the cat.

“Hell no!” he shouted. “I have enough issues with you lot. Why would I ever create more of me? That sounds like a nightmare.”

“I second that.” Isis raised her hand.

“Well, the baby situation has been solved.” Bartholomew pointed at his sister with another strip of bacon. Constantine took the opportunity to bite it off. “Hey, you have your own plate.”

“Don’t be waving around tasty treats and think they aren’t going down.” Constantine gave Bart a brilliant smile.

“Can I add Constantine to my list of things I don’t like today?”

“Nope.” Isis shook her head. “You missed your chance.”

“Fine.” Bartholomew pulled his plate of bacon away from the cat with a glare. “Are you having breakfast?”

“I had a veggie omelet.” Isis winked at him.

“You know once you transformed you can eat anything you like, and it won’t cause any intestinal pain or make you fat?” Constantine asked.

“Of course, I do,” she replied, shaking her head. “Why do you think I made Bartholomew pancakes? I realized his gluten intolerance was gone.”

“So, why are you still not eating meat?” The cat pushed his point.

“I still don’t like the taste.”

“That’s fair,” Bartholomew conceded. “It also means I can eat all of your bacon and steak.”

“Good, looking out for me.” Isis reached over and combed his hair with her fingers. “Your hair grows so fast. We really need to get it cut.”

“Tell me about it.” The curls were dropping closer to his eyes each day. “Can we get back to our problem? We have no clues about what is going on in Haven and the three dead bodies. Who, by the way, were in perfect health prior to dying.”

“Have you checked with Abuelita?” Isis asked, and both Bartholomew and Constantine stared at her.

“It didn’t even cross my mind.” Bartholomew admitted.

“She is the hub for the entire supernatural community in town. Stop by?” Isis stood from the table. “If you get lucky, Gabriel might be there. You can check if the angelic realm can share some insights.”

“It doesn’t hurt to ask,” Constantine told Bart.

“Where are you going?” Bartholomew asked his sister.

“Heading to New York City to find me a fall dress for this party,” she informed them from the door. “Would you mind getting the dishes for me?”

“Of course, but when are you coming back?”

“I should be home this evening, if not by breakfast tomorrow. What do you need?”

Bartholomew rubbed his hands together. “Since you are heading to NYC, can you bring us back some Cannoli?”

Bartholomew was addicted to the Italian dessert. As soon as he could eat regular pastries, he had gone on a binge of all kinds. The Italian ones were his favorite.

“Anything else?” Isis teased from the door.

“A New York pizza would be amazing,” Constantine added.

“I’m always amazed at beings who technically don’t need food, how much you can put down. You two eat like a small army.” Isis shook her head. “But I will deliver.”

“Thanks.” Bartholomew pushed his pancakes around with his fork.

“What’s on your mind?” Isis came back to the room.

“Would it be okay to dress up for Halloween?”

Isis crossed the room again and hugged him tight. “You will never be too old or grown to dress up.” She kissed his forehead. “I would actually recommend decorating the Station. It’s our holiday, after all.”

Bartholomew beamed at Constantine, but the cat dropped his head.

“This is such a bad idea, Isis,” Constantine told her.

“It would be great,” he replied. “We can have kids come to the Station and trick or treat. It would guarantee it’s safe and everyone can dress up.”

“That’s the spirit,” Isis informed him. “Let me know what you want me to come as.”

“I need to call Pete,” Bartholomew jumped from the table.

“You also need a shower and put some clothes on,” Constantine reminded him.

Bartholomew glanced down and realized for the first time that morning that he was only wearing his boxers. “Good call.”

“Try to behave,” Isis told them as she headed towards her room in the back.

“Where can we get costumes for everyone this late in the month?” Bartholomew asked, focusing on eating again.

“What costumes?” asked Constantine. “We have an entire shifter community. Just have people wear their Sunday best, and they would be perfectly dressed up.”

“Well, that’s easy enough.”

“When are you heading to Abuelita’s?”

“As soon as I shower and get dressed,” Bartholomew replied. “It will give me plenty of time before the lunch crowd gets there.”

“While you are there, pick up some pork tamales.” Constantine licked his lips.

“Those are delicious,” Bartholomew informed him. “Do we want any enchiladas with those?”

“Might as well,” Constantine replied. “Eugene is here, and he actually needs food. Let’s make it a Mexican lunch.”

“I like how you think.”

Bartholomew felt better with a plan in place. It probably helped that his sister was in the building. The conversation about babies had made him uncomfortable, but he was grateful he didn’t have to worry about it for a very long time.

“But how to pay back those stuck-up elves for messing with Isis?” That was the real question Bartholomew would ponder during the day. Nobody made his sister feel less than.

Chapter Twenty-One



“Great job today,” Bob told Shorty as they left the courtroom. They stood in the building's foyer, a peaceful silence all around. Shorty adjusted his suspenders and smiled at Bob.

“It was a group effort,” he told his friend.

“When did you start wearing suspenders?”

“They are my lucky pair.” Shorty showed off the straps. “They come with skulls.”

“I’m not a suspender kind of guy, but those are pretty nice.”

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

Both Shorty and Bob dropped flat to the ground at the sound of the alarm. The officer manning the reception desk also took cover behind his desk and pulled his revolver.

“Are we under attack?” the officer shouted over his shoulder.

“No idea, but stay down,” Bob shouted back.

“Attention, all personnel,” Pete’s voice blared through the intercom. “We have a code silver plus in the cells. Only trained personnel should assist.”

“What’s a code silver?” Shorty asked.

“I have no idea,” Bob replied. “When did we start using codes?”

“I kind of mentioned to Pete what Abby suggested.”

“Jesus Christ.” Bob jumped to his feet. “Before we start implementing new procedures, how about some training?”

Shorty quickly followed. “It is Pete we are talking about.”

“Let’s go.”

“Do we qualify as trained personnel?”

“Shorty, if we aren’t qualified, nobody else is. Hurry!”

“Boss!” screamed the guard over the wailing alarms. “Should I go?”

“No! Stay at your post as usual. Just find someone to kill the sirens.” Bob took off down the hall at a full sprint. Shorty followed quickly behind, pulling out his tranquilizer gun.

They reached the dungeons in time to duck as three of their team were thrown through the air.

“I really doubt any of our team is ready for whatever is going on in there,” Shorty informed him, placing himself flat against the doorway.

“Check on those three,” Bob told him. “I’m going on.”

“Are you serious?”

Bob never replied. Instead, he pulled his own tranquilizer gun and rushed into the room. The scene was pure chaos. A ten-foot troll was going berserk in the back. The Triplets were holding one troll’s arm. He was spinning them around like rag dolls.

“Triplets!” Bob shouted. “Disengage now.”

Triplet-1 and Triplet-3 heard the order and dropped. Unfortunately for -2, the troll had taken a hold of his legs and had him upside down. The intent was clear. The troll was planning to slam the man against the wall. An impact like that would break his back or worse, kill him.

Bob didn’t have many options. He picked a discarded chair and used it as a battering ram as he charged the troll. The impact didn’t knock the thing down, but it confused it enough to drop Triplet-2.

“Get him out of here,” Bob told them.

The other two rushed to help their buddy, but this left Bob alone with the troll. Bob had never seen an enraged troll before. Most of the ones that lived in Haven were the nicest beings he’d ever met. They were gentle and overly friendly. This one seemed like he had lost his mind.

“Hey, buddy,” Bob told him, slowly backing away. “I’m going to need you to calm down.”

The troll roared.

“Bob, get out of there,” Shorty told his friend.

“Buddy, we don’t want to hurt you.”

The troll wasn’t listening. He roared at Bob, and with a fist the size of Bob’s head, he swung at him. Bob tripped over one chair, and the troll nailed him straight in the chest. The blow sent Bob four feet in the air. Bob

felt something crack in his chest and landed out of breath. The troll took the opportunity to charge. Flat on the ground, Bob saw the troll rushing, getting ready to squish him like a bug.

Unable to move, Bob did the only thing he could think of. Extending his arm in front of him, he screamed at the top of his lungs, “STOP!”

The troll froze.

Bob blinked several times at the sight of the troll’s foot inches away from his face, spit dripping down his jaw. Bob looked behind him, and his team was hiding behind the door, staring at him. Shorty gave him a thumbs up, but shrugged in confusion.

“Back away!” Bob ordered, in a voice he hadn’t used in decades, not since he left the military. He could feel power flowing from him.

The troll, to Bob’s shock and relief, obeyed. He moved back away from Bob, like he was under a spell. Bob shimmied away from the troll on his butt, chest hurting.

“On your knees,” Bob ordered the troll, who sank to his knees completely docile. “Shorty, hurry. I need a tranquilizer syringe. I don’t know how long he will stay like this.”

Triplet-2 handed Bob the emergency kit on the far wall, being closer to it. Bob took a large syringe that was probably used to knock out elephants and approached the troll.

“This won’t hurt you,” he told the troll, gentle but stern. “But we need to inspect you.”

Finding a vein in the troll, he administered the high dose of Eugene’s secret compound. The troll followed Bob’s movement with his eyes but never moved. Bob placed a hand over the troll’s shoulder.

“Sleep, my friend,” Bob ordered, and the troll collapsed.

“Call me a yellow-cab!” said Shorty from the door. “If you could do that this whole time, why have we been tranquilizing folks and drenching them with water?”

“I have no idea what I did.” Bob looked at his hand and then back at the troll. “But let’s not waste time. Place him in a cell and call the doctor. Trolls are not violent.”

“He has been poisoned,” said TJ, running into the room.

“Ouch,” said Shorty. “What happened to your face?”

TJ pointed to the troll. “He happened. When I was taking a blood sample, he snapped.”

“What is going on here?” Bob asked the crowd.

Little J stepped up to Bob with his hand raised.

“He got you, too?” Shorty asked the young man.

Little J nodded. “It was weird.” He touched his bruised eye but pulled away at the pain. “One minute he was fine, and the next all hell broke loose.”

“Did he say anything before snapping?” Bob took over the question.

“He came to file a complaint against his neighbor, a witch that moved in next to him.” Little J winced as TJ started inspecting his cuts.

The Triplets had finished securing the troll and were picking up all the broken furniture from the room.

“Let me guess, the guy had poisoned him?” Bob took a shot at the story.

“Not just him,” said Little J. “The witch poisoned his garden, and the big guy was worried about his kids and wife.”

TJ stopped cleaning Little J’s wounds and glanced behind towards the cell. “If the poison he ingested did that to him, can you imagine a whole family of trolls going mad at the town?”

“Oh, shit!” Shorty shouted. “Here I was trying to be good and not cursed, and now you bring crap like that.”

“Is that why you used that yellow-cab phrase?” Triplet-1 asked.

“Yeah,” said Shorty. “Met this really neat fellow who has all the coolest sayings, but he doesn’t swear. I might need more practice before they come naturally.”

“We are all thrilled for your reformation, Shorty, but we have a major problem here.” Bob pointed to the sleeping troll.

“I got it!” Angela rushed into the cell carrying another huge syringe. “What happened?”

“You are a bit too late, Doc. The threat has been contained.” Shorty told her.

“Threat?” Angela looked around the room. “TJ, didn’t you tell me the poisoned victim was here?”

“Stand clear!” Pete shouted from the door, with twenty other pixies behind him. “We are about to dust everyone.”

“STOP!” Bob ordered for the second time in less than ten minutes, and this time, the entire room froze. “God, now what?”

“Well, it was about time,” said Death, as she strolled into the room, styling a red pants suit from Oscar de la Renta.

“Death, what is going on?” Bob spun around to face his team.

“You finally tapped into your powers,” Death explained. “It took you longer than I expected.”

“Powers?”

“Do you remember how Isis used to control people through her music?” Death took a seat on top of the desk.

Bob nodded.

“Each intern manifests theirs differently,” Death explained. “It seems War’s influence on you goes deeper than I thought. Yours are coming across as direct commands, not as subtle as my other interns.”

“What are you saying? That every time I speak, I will freeze people?”

Death chuckled. “Not that drastic. It’s all about intent.” Death glanced around the room. “It’s more like every time you channel your inner sergeant, people will obey those commands. I would definitely recommend practicing a bit to avoid accidents.”

“How do I fix it?” Bob pointed at his friend.

“Fix it?”

“Get them out of this trance?” He waved a hand in front of Shorty.

“How would you normally release a soldier from attention?” Death asked gently.

Bob turned slowly to face Death. “I used to say, at ease.”

At the sound of the words, the chaos returned to the room. Bob was stunned.

“Now, Bob, you are a full intern,” said Death and vanished from the room.

Shorty glanced behind Bob’s back. “Was that Death? Is she responsible for all of this?”

“No.” Bob shook his head.

“Boss!” Five different people shouted for his attention.

Bob raised a hand, and everyone stopped. Slowly, he moved away from the group toward the door of the break area.

“I’m going to need a few minutes,” Bob informed them. “In the meantime, Doctor, what’s in the syringe?” Bob turned slowly to face her.

“An antidote to the poison.”

“Good.” Bob nodded. “Let’s make sure our friend there is back to his normal self. Pete, prepare a team to go to the troll’s farm. If his family is infected, we need to treat them ASAP.”

“On it, boss.” Pete saluted in the air. “Pixie squad, with me.”

They flew away, spraying pixie dust all over the hall.

“I’ll be right back.” Bob left the cells and made his way up the stairs.

His hands were trembling, and he had to hold on to the railing to climb. He sat at the top step of the stairs, but only getting shallow breaths. Bob leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes.

A few minutes later, Shorty climbed the steps and sat next to Bob. “Are you okay, big-guy?”

“I’m an intern,” Bob told him.

“Yes, you are,” Shorty agreed and leaned closer to Bob. “Are you sick? Did you get some of the poison on you?”

“I’m fine,” Bob answered. “Actually, I’m better than fine. Shorty, I have powers.”

“Didn’t you always have powers?” Shorty continued to examine his friend. “I mean, powers come with the job, right?”

“They never manifested,” Bob explained. “I figured I was just a stand-in until the new guy showed up. Or I wasn’t it because Isis was still alive.”

“I thought they changed that rule?”

“Shorty, I’m actually Death’s intern!” Bob rubbed his face and tears were fighting to escape his eyes.

“I’m confused,” Shorty finally admitted. “You have always been Death’s intern to us. You run Haven and the world listens. I didn’t realize you doubted it.”

“I guess I thought I was too old to be an intern, reason I never got the gifts.” Bob dropped his head against the wall.

“Did you check to see if you had them?”

“Well, there is nothing special about me. It’s not like I can play an instrument or anything.”

Shorty punched Bob in the chest. Bob winced from the pain.

“For such a smart man, you are an idiot,” Shorty stood. “Basically, you were running around thinking you were like a backup plan waiting to be replaced, and you never even tried to see if you could do magic. You deserved to get hit by the troll. Hard-headed.”

Shorty extended a hand to Bob. “Let’s go, jackass.”

“Hey, I thought you weren’t cursing,” Bob reminded him.

“Oh, please,” said Shorty. “Nobody listens to pretty little words. Let’s take you to the hospital so Angela can heal those ribs. I’m sure some of

them are broken.”

Bob allowed his friend to raise him to his feet and dragged him back downstairs. “But our troll situation?”

“Pete has a team in route to the farm,” said Shorty, leading the way. “I’m planning to take another one to pay a visit to the new neighbor.”

At the basement landing, Bob stopped. “Is that safe? The man is not afraid of a troll. Who knows what he would do?”

“Trust me, not planning to go alone.” Shorty turned around and let out a loud whistle.

“Ouch!” Bob covered his ears.

“Our new recruit just came back from training.” Shorty pointed at the huge guy marching next to the pretty female officer, Ruby. “We really could have used him with the troll.”

“What is he?” Bob asked quietly.

Shorty could not reply, as the recruit joined them in less than two seconds. He had the face of a kid, maybe eighteen, but was closer to eight feet tall.

“Recruit Jesse. Ready for duty,” the young man told them.

“Jesse, meet the boss,” Shorty made the introductions. “Jesse is joining us from the lands of the giants up in Canada.”

“A pleasure, Jesse.” Bob extended his hand, and the young man shook it. Jesse’s hands were so large that it made Bob look like that of an infant next to him.

“Thank you so much for letting me join,” said Jesse in a faster speech than most southerners were used to.

“What made you come to Haven?”

Jesse shuffled around. “I really don’t fit in with my family.”

Bob waited for Jesse to continue, but the boy was uncomfortable. When it was obvious that Jesse would not say anything else, Bob smiled at him.

“You really don’t owe anyone any explanation. If you ever need to share, come and see me. If not, you are still part of this family.”

Jesse perked up and saluted again.

“Now I’m not sure how dangerous this witch is, so you all watch each other’s back, got it?” Bob asked the young man.

“Yes, boss,” Jesse told him enthusiastically.

“Jesse, let Ruby know I’ll be there in a second,” Shorty told him. “We leave as soon as I get there.”

“Yes, Mr. Shorty.” Jesse took off at a sprint, making the floor vibrate with each step.

“His family kicked him out because he has mixed blood,” Shorty explained. “The boy is not big enough for the giants.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“I’m glad you found your powers, Bob,” Shorty told his oldest friend. “But you have always been our leader, even without them. You just made that outcast feel like a million bucks. That’s power, my friend. Never take it for granted.”

Bob patted Shorty’s arm. “Thank you, my friend.”

“You better get to Angela before she comes looking for you.” Shorty took off down the hall.

Bob watched him go. The hospital wing was another level down. It was a good thing he wasn’t in any hurry, because all his bones were hurting. Maybe there should have been an easier way to discover his powers.

Chapter Twenty-Two



It took him longer to leave Reapers than he expected. Constantine had fried the motor on his drone and Bartholomew was forced to help fix it. It shouldn't have taken them long but working with Constantine was a test of patience. The cat was convinced he could do anything, even without having practical thumbs. As a result, Bartholomew was forced to show multiple times everything he did before Constantine was satisfied and move to the next step.

By the time Bartholomew left Reapers, it was way past lunch time. He pulled up to the small Mexican restaurant on New Boston Road, named after the owner, Abuelita. Small was a relative term for the establishment. The place was tiny, with enough room for a couple of tables, and a salsa-bar. It was quaint, with the best Mexican food in the twin-cities. The parking lot was actually bigger than the restaurant, and completely empty at this time of the day.

Abuelita did not discriminate with her clientele. She catered to both humans and every supernatural being that moved in Haven. It was the reason she became the hub of info in the entire region. Everyone was welcome in the restaurant, and everyone was protected. It also helped that Abuelita was one of the most powerful witches Bartholomew knew. Next to Isis's godmother, Abuelita was up there.

Ting. Ting. Ting.

Bartholomew smiled as the chime on the door greeted him. The place even had pleasant chimes. Instead of those loud bells, that scared people to

death every time they went off.

“Now this is a surprise.” Angelito met Bartholomew by the door. “You are roaming the town on a Wednesday. That’s new.”

“Hey, people have to eat around here.” Bartholomew rubbed his stomach.

Angelito took a long look at Bartholomew and just shook his head. “Boy, please. You are like five percent body fat. Do you actually eat?”

Bartholomew didn’t bother replying, and just walked past his instigator. Angelito was Abuelita’s grandson and was in better shape than anyone he knew. Isis had complained about Angelito for being lazy and a player. After she quit the restaurant, he stepped up. Around the same height as Bartholomew, with large, almond-shaped, brown eyes, and spiky, black hair, Bartholomew was sure Angelito had ladies chasing him around. But if Isis was right, he also had the same taste in women as Erick. Bad!

Maybe it was just a man trait to find women who would give them a run for their money. Why weren’t any of his friends interested in good, innocent girls? Bartholomew often wondered. Well, everyone but TJ. Bartholomew was hoping he eventually would ask Abby out.

“Am I too late to order?”

“For you, never.” Angelito told him. “Even if we were closed, Grandma would cook for you. But since you are here, I’ll run off to make my deliveries.”

“What?” Bartholomew spun to face Angelito. “Are you telling me you do deliveries? Door Dash?”

“I’ll be damned!” shouted Angelito. “It’s bad enough we extended our hours for all those hippies that have moved in. They can drag their butts here if they want food. I’m not delivering food.”

“What are you doing?”

“Bills.” Angelito showed him the stacks of letters he was holding. “Somehow grandma refuses to move to this century and pay these things online. What is wrong with this woman?”

“Constantine was like that for a while.” Bartholomew mentioned.

“Fine, but at least he is like thousands of years old, that makes sense.” He pointed to the kitchen. “She has no excuse.”

“Who are you talking to?” Abuelita’s voice came from the back of the restaurant.

“I’m off to the post office!” Angelito shouted. “Leaving you with a guest. Try to eat proper food, Bart. You are making the rest of us look bad.”

Bartholomew waved at Angelito as he ran out the door. Abuelita walked out of the kitchen into the dinner area to find Bartholomew staring at the door.

“Bartholomew, honey, how are you?”

Bartholomew didn’t have time to reply as she embraced him in a huge hug. It took Bartholomew a few minutes to gather his thoughts and eventually hug her back.

“What are you doing here? Figured you would be busy at the Station getting ready for the holiday,” Abuelita told him.

“We are definitely trying,” he replied.

“Are you hungry?”

“I’m never turning down your food.” Bartholomew gave her his best smile. “But I also have a to-go order.”

“Wouldn’t expect anything less,” she teased. “Come. Join me at the bar while I get the food ready. Tell me, what is that crazy cat craving today?”

Abuelita adjusted her apron and headed back towards the kitchen through the set of double doors. Her silver hair neatly tied and held in place by a hairnet. Her mocha complexion didn’t have a single wrinkle. If it wasn’t for the hair, nobody would ever believe she was a grandmother.

Bartholomew took a seat in front of the large window that faced the kitchen. A thick polished bar had been set up for those clients who enjoyed watching people cook. It was his favorite spot. It also helped to avoid unwanted conversation from other patrons.

“Hold up, let me look at my notes.” Bartholomew pulled out his phone. “Interesting, I have a text from Abby?”

“What was that?” Abuelita asked.

“Nothing.” Bartholomew skipped the text and went directly to his note. He would check on Abby after he was done. “Okay, he wants half a dozen pork tamales, another half of chicken, four beef enchiladas, a large order of Menudo. I don’t know what that this.”

“It’s tripe,” Abuelita explained.

“I was better off not knowing.” Bartholomew shook his head and kept on reading. “Five brisket tacos, and three orders of chips and salsa.”

“Are you boys having visitors today?” Abuelita placed a large bowl of chips with a bowl of salsa in front of Bartholomew.

“Not that I know of.” Bartholomew munched away.

“This is all for you two?” Abuelita handed him a plate of pork and beef tamales.

“Nope,” answered Bartholomew. “We are only splitting the tamales. Everything else is for him.”

“Where does he put it?” she asked.

“Who knows, but I’m surprised he is not round.”

Abuelita laughed and poured two large glasses of Horchata, one for each of them.

“These are amazing,” Bartholomew told her.

“I’m glad you like them. Salud.”

They clinked their glasses together, and Bartholomew took a long drink from his glass.

“Now,” Abuelita said softly. “What do I owe the pleasure of your visit? I’m sure you are not just here for the food.”

“I could be just here for the food,” he argued, trying to swallow.

“But you are not.” She smiled at him. “You have worry lines all over your face, Bartholomew. You can’t hide your emotions very well.”

Bartholomew lowered his fork and smiled. “What have you heard about the stuff happening in Haven?”

“The missing kids?”

“That is a great starting point, and the mysterious deaths.” Bartholomew placed his head on his palms.

“Mysterious? Rumor has it they all died of natural causes.” Abuelita refilled her cup.

“Heart attacks in their twenties, and all shifters with no pre-existing medical conditions?”

“Now that sounds weird.” Abuelita took a long drink. “Haven’t heard anyone taking credit for the deaths. But there is a lot of talk about who is going missing.”

“Why?”

“What do you know about the bodies?”

Bartholomew started counting off their similarities with his fingers. “All males, under the age of thirty, in great shape, alcohol was involved, they were all shifters . . .”

“Stop there,” Abuelita interrupted him. “What kind of shifters?”

“Actually, I never asked.” Bartholomew pulled his phone to check his notes.

“They were all werewolves,” Abuelita supplied the info.

“Is that bad?” Bartholomew put his phone down.

“What do you know about werewolves, Bart?” Abuelita asked.

“Probably not much,” he said. “I know we now have multiple packs in Haven.”

“Werewolves are not like any other shifters you would ever meet,” Abuelita started. “They are pack creatures, like many of the canine families.”

“I figured that much.”

“That’s only the start.” Abuelita poured more salsa into Bartholomew’s bowl. “But they are territorial, overly loyal, and tend to take offense to the death when the pack is involved.”

“I’m not liking the sound of this.”

“Do you remember what started the Trojan war?”

“What?” Bartholomew looked around at the shift in conversation.

“How good is your history?”

“History or mythology?”

Abuelita smirked. “You are the ward of Death. Do you really think the gods of old were not real?”

“Good point.” He pointed with his chip. “Well, according to Homer it was fought because of Helen of Troy.” Bartholomew dropped his chip.

“Now you are getting it.” Abuelita took a chip from his bowl and ate it.

“We are amid a potential werewolf war because of a girl!” Bartholomew was ready to bounce from his seat.

“Rumor has it the fiancé of the Coleman’s heir ran away with a member of the opposite pack,” Abuelita explained. “The Colemans refused to believe she left voluntarily. Werewolves have been forced to pick sides, and the conflict keeps escalating.”

“This is madness!” Bartholomew finally shouted. “Do they understand if war starts, we will wipe them all out?”

“Is that still a thing?”

Bartholomew nodded vigorously.

“Well.” Abuelita went back to her drink. “This is bad.”

“Yes!” Bartholomew dropped his head on the bar. “But the Colemans claimed they are not the ones responsible for the kidnapping or murders.”

“We hear the same,” she informed him. “The elders think someone is trying to set them up to create more frictions among all the packs.”

“It’s working.”

“Knock, knock,” a melodious male voice said from the door. “Is this a party of one, or can others join?”

Bartholomew turned and waved at the Archangel Gabriel, in his more mundane human form. The angel was still brilliantly gorgeous, but at least he didn’t have massive wings. Golden hair floated by an invisible wind. Regardless of the season, Gabriel always wore Bermuda shorts with Hawaiian shirts. It was a very jarring sight, but it was a blessing the man was so beautiful.

“Gabriel, darling, come right in,” Abuelita announced, rushing around the bar to give the angel a hug.

“Hi, Gabriel.” Bartholomew waved a hand at the angel.

“You look frazzled, my friend,” Gabriel said, standing next to the young Reaper.

“You know, the usual, searching for a killer, stopping wars, trying to not commit genocide. Just another day in Haven.” Bartholomew dropped his head back down on the bar.

“Let’s totally avoid the genocide part,” Gabriel informed him.

“You wouldn’t know who is doing the killing around town?” Bartholomew asked, as Abuelita headed back to the kitchen for more chips and salsa.

“Remember, we do not interfere with the affairs of humans.” Gabriel took a chip from Bartholomew’s bowl.

“Right, free will and all.” Bartholomew made a waving hand gesture.

“Yes, free will and all,” Gabriel reminded him.

“Have you ever considered if your side got more involved, humanity would have fewer issues?”

“Free will,” Gabriel restated.

“Yes.” Bartholomew rolled his eyes.

“But I can’t stay long, planning lunch for the office party,”

Bartholomew snapped his head back up and looked at Gabriel. “Heaven is celebrating Halloween?”

“Not that holiday.” Gabriel shook his head. “All Souls Day.”

“That one, got it.” Bartholomew went back to his tamales and ignored the angel placing his order.

“See you around, Bartholomew,” Gabriel told him after his order was taken. “Don’t kill anyone.”

“It’s against company policy,” replied Bartholomew. “Unless you start a war in Haven, then all bets are off.”

Gabriel shook his head but didn’t reply. He waved. Bartholomew waved back as the angel left the building.

“It would be really helpful if that side took a more active role like the other did,” Bartholomew told Abuelita.

“Do you really want to be influenced by both sides?”

“Me, personally, no,” he said honestly. “But humanity could seriously use the help.”

“You can’t have it both ways.” Abuelita ruffled his hair, then went back to the kitchen. “I should have your food ready in five minutes.”

“No rush,” Bartholomew told her. “I have plenty of chips to keep me busy. Besides, all I have is bad news to deliver. I’m sure it can wait.”

Bartholomew made himself comfortable in his chair and continued to stuff his face with tamales and chips. If he was going to destroy an entire pack, at least he wouldn’t be hungry while doing it.

Chapter Twenty-Three



The entire afternoon was gone by the time Bob was released from the infirmary. It was a quarter past four when he made his way to his office, looking disheveled.

“Boss, what took you so long?” Abby asked as he rushed into the office.

“Well, it seems mending bones and internal organs takes a very long time.” Bob sat cautiously in his chair. “What’s going on?”

“The witches are here!” Abby exclaimed.

“Is that code for something?” Bob searched his office for an explanation.

“Code for the delegation from the Order of Witches is heading our way?” Abby squealed.

“Now?” Bob jumped to his feet, making him wince.

“Our scouts are tracking four limos heading our way with the Order’s flags.” Abby was pacing the office.

“Why are you so nervous?”

“I really don’t like witches,” she blurted.

“Aren’t you a witch?”

“I’m a stunted witch,” Abby clarified. “While I was born with powers, they never developed. The Order has never allowed me to claim the title since I don’t have powers. Hence, we do not get along.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Bob told her.

“Not my rules,” she replied. “But they will be here shortly, and I don’t want to be here when they arrive. Do you mind if I leave early?”

“Sure, go ahead,” Bob told her. “Are you going to be okay?”

Abby stopped and smiled at Bob. "I'll be fine, boss. I just don't have good memories of them. It's better if I head off, so I don't cause you any trouble."

"You will never be trouble, but I understand."

"You also should change your shirt." Abby pointed at the bloodstain in the front. "You still want to make a good impression."

"Thanks."

Abby rushed out of the office, and Bob made his way towards his closet. It had become a practice for every member of the team to keep multiple outfits in the office. With the amount of accidents they had, you never knew when clean clothes would be needed.

"At least my pants are clean," Bob told himself as he adjusted his shirt in the closet mirror.

Click.

The intercom on his desk buzzed, and Bob moved closer to it.

"Boss, a very loud group of witches is looking for you," announced the officer.

Bob smiled at the frankness of the young man. "I'll be there in a minute. See if they would like any coffee while they wait."

"Will do, boss."

Shorty ran into the room, gun holster flapping as he went.

"Have you heard?" Shorty said, out of breath. "We have limos blocking traffic in front of the building."

"What traffic?" As far as Bob could remember, the only people that ever drove in front of their building were cops.

"All the rubberneckers trying to see who is in Texarkana."

"That would be that delegation of witches," Bob said, adjusting his tie.

"Have they heard of discreetness?" Shorty marched around the room. "How are we supposed to explain that many limos to the humans?"

Bob wasn't sure when the change had happened, but nobody at the Station considered themselves human, even without magic. A transition had taken place, settled at first, but it was permanent. The crew wasn't supernatural like the witches or shifters, but they weren't totally human anymore. They were Death's crew, and that carried respect around Haven.

"Well, how about if we explain that to them?"

Shorty glanced back at his friends. "You know those people don't handle rejection well."

“They can get happy just as quickly as they get mad,” Bob informed his friend. “Let’s go.”

Bob took another vest from his office closet. This one was blood red, with tiny scythes embroidered on it. Shorty adjusted his holsters and took the safety off both of his tranquilizer guns.

“Are you planning to knock someone out?”

“If I have my way, the leader of the bunch is going down.”

Bob smiled and was sure Shorty was not kidding. They took their time making it down the stairs to the main foyer, with Shorty giving Bob an update of the treacherous neighbor. The family of trolls was treated prior to disaster taking over Texarkana. The neighbor was currently in custody until Monday, awaiting court.

“Did he put up a fight?” Bob asked as they reached the landing.

“He actually tried to curse us,” Shorty explained, making Bob stop in the foyer.

“And?”

“And he got bitch-slapped by Jesse across his front lawn,” Shorty added with a devious grin. “The man is running a black-potions shop out of his house and was trying to steal the trolls’ land to expand.”

“That takes balls,” said Bob, frowning.

“We really should have let the trolls go postal on his ass and see how long his plan would have lasted.” Shorty stood next to Bob, examining the congregation of witches dressed in exotic capes. “Now he is complaining of police brutality and wants to sue.”

“Maybe we should hand him over to that group, and they can drag him back to Salem for judgment.”

“I like that,” admitted Shorty. “Do they still burn people at the stake there?”

“I really hope not, or we will get an exodus of witches that we cannot control.” Bob gave Shorty one last thoughtful glance before marching to the congregation. “Good afternoon.”

Three female witches and one male one marched towards Bob. Their steps echoed on the tiles and Bob wondered if they had added taps to their shoes. The four stopped just a few feet from the intern, all glaring at him. It would have been an intimidating sight if the witches were at least Bob’s height. They were barely taller than Shorty, and only because of their heels. Bob was at a whole foot taller and had to look down at them.

“Do you know how long we were waiting?” A witch with silver hair spoke, and Bob assumed she was the leader.

“And you are?” Bob spoke slower than usual, with an added southern accent to his speech. It confused people and made them underestimate him.

“I’m Clara, the head witch of this expedition,” Clara announced, raising her voice. “You were supposed to be expecting us.”

“Did we forget to put the red carpet on the door and the welcome banners?” Shorty asked, adding a touch of sarcasm to his voice as he adjusted his guns again.

“Do you know who we are?” another woman with spiky, red hair asked.

“Does it look like we care?” Bob added, dropping the accent.

The group gasped, and the witches near the entrance turned towards them.

“You can’t . . .” the woman in red started to say.

“Enough!” Bob ordered, adding his newly found powers to the command.

The witches found their mouths closing tight. Clara and the redhead backed away from the intern.

“We were told you did not have any power,” the man told Bob.

“Oh, so you came here thinking you’re big and tough, and thought Bob was just going to bow down to you,” Shorty ended his statement with a snort. “Welcome to Texas, witches.”

“Does he speak for you?” Clara questioned Bob.

“You really don’t want to know what I’m thinking,” he told her.

“We are here on official business,” Clara continued.

“About that,” Bob said, and started pacing around the group. “This is Haven. You have no business in my town. Last time I checked, you forbid the entrance of our Reapers to Salem without permission. What makes you think you get the free rein of our domain without prior approval?”

“You have an accord with the high priestess, Virginia Black,” Clara reminded him.

“Yes, we do.” Bob turned to Shorty. “Did you say her name was Virginia?”

“Not that I can remember,” answered Shorty. “When we got attacked, did you come to help us?”

Both Bob and Shorty rubbed their chins and moved around the crowd.

“Changes are happening in town,” Bob told them. “The Order of Witches no longer has free passes into our terrain. We will approve all actions

sanctioned by the Order in advance. And if you would like to come and visit, I recommend updating your immigration policies for Salem. We are done here.”

“What?” three of the witches shouted.

“Did I stutter?” Bob asked them.

“We are here to celebrate the holiday,” the redhead moved closer to Bob. “You have the biggest ley line going across this side of the Mississippi that is not harnessed by anyone. We have permission to tap into it.”

“Tap into it?” Bob asked.

“What are they tapping?” Shorty moved next to Bob.

“That’s not what I told your committee,” Bob informed them. “You will not be setting magic circles around the Texarkana Post Office, because you want to summon who knows what.”

“The blessing could reach thousands,” Clara protested.

“The post office in downtown Texarkana? Where the FBI is located?” Shorty recapped the situation.

“That post office.” Bob nodded, adjusting his stance, feet shoulder width apart.

“Have you lost your minds?” Shorty shouted. “Why don’t you fly a banner over the town announcing to the humans that magic is real and the supernatural world is taking over?”

“We can do things like this in Salem,” the redhead pouted.

“Yes.” Bob leaned down to glare at the woman. “And Salem is a tourist town who expects all sorts of shenanigans to happen, and Harry Potter to be real. This is the Bible Belt, and we are not opening that can of worms.”

“Do you think you can stop us if we decided to take over this pitiful little town?” a male witch asked, letting magic escape his fingertips.

Shorty removed his guns from their holsters. The officer hit the panic button under the desk, then stood slowly from the desk, pulling out his own gun. Bob monitored everyone carefully, knowing he had thirty seconds before his entire squad descended on them to blast everyone to hell and back. Calmly, he stood straighter and walked over to the male witch.

“Listen here, boy.” Bob tapped into his core, to that place where he was recognizing his power to lie and filled his words with it. “We have battled demons, vampires, ogres, and plenty of your kind. If you came here looking for trouble, I’ll inform you, we will mail your bodies in urns back to Salem. The only reason the Order is tolerated here is out of respect for Virginia

because she is Isis's godmother." Bob leaned down to the man. "But make no mistake. We will destroy you all to protect our home."

The witches all moved in a protective circle. The ones near the door, closing in on the leading party. Shorty flanked Bob to his left with the officer on duty, taking his right. It was going to be a wild-wild west showdown. A soft whistle filled the air, and the witches glanced at the ceiling. Pete and all his kids had surrounded them. Over fifty pixies stood holding inch-long swords with gladiator shields ready for battle.

"Give the word, boss," Pete announced. "And we will make shish kebabs out of this lot."

"Your move, witches," Bob said instead. "You got several options here. One, you conform to our rules. Two, get the hell out and never come back, or three, you die. The time for playing nice is over."

"Welcome to Haven, fuckers!" Shorty added, pulling the hammer of his gun back.

Clap. Clap. Clap.

A hooded witch clapped as they climbed the stairs to the Station. The tension increased, and Bob gave a head signal to Pete to watch the new arrival. The aerial platoon broke off in two, ready to attack.

"Now see what you have done, Sylvester," said the figure in a deep voice that was familiar to Bob. "You have gone off and woken up a sleeping giant, and their group of misfits is ready to show you why you shouldn't mess with Texas."

"And you are?" Bob asked, realizing who the greater threat was between the witches.

He reached slowly into his back pocket and pulled out the cylinder that held his scythe.

"Now I'm hurt," said the newcomer. "And here I thought we were friends."

Bob engaged the mechanism on the scythe, extending the weapon to its full size.

"My friends do not go around hiding their faces." Bob spun the scythe with one hand, making even the most experienced color guard in a college marching band proud.

"Now that's impressive." The man pulled the hood back, revealing dark hair professionally styled and deep-brown eyes to match. "That's how you make a statement."

“Eric!” Shorty screamed, as the entire Station shouted his name afterwards.

Bob lowered his scythe by his side to lean against it. “Please tell me you are not here to support this madness.”

“On the contrary, just making sure these fools don’t get blown apart.” Eric walked around the circle of witches and gave all his friends one of those manly half-hugs. Once done, Eric turned toward the witches. “Convinced now?”

“Convinced of what?” Shorty asked, stepping on his tiptoes to whisper in the tall witch’s ear.

“Haven is becoming a new destination for the supernatural community,” Clara explained, pushing her hands inside the sleeves of her hood. “We needed to make sure you could still defend the gates of hell against an attack.”

“This was a test?” Bob confirmed, and Clara nodded. “We are glad we passed. More importantly, be thankful Eric was here to save all your asses. Because we were ready to introduce you to the elevator with a one stop ticket.”

“You really don’t want that ride,” Shorty added. “Goodbye.”

“But we are not done,” Clara argued.

“We are,” Bob told them. “Be advised. You are all on probation in our town. We will discuss you access to our city when new arrangements are made regarding Salem. In the meantime, don’t leave your hotel without permission.”

“This is absurd,” Sylvester said.

“Maybe if you all would have been honest from the beginning about your intentions, we wouldn’t treat you like a threat.” Bob waved them goodbye.

The witches tried to move forward, but Pete with fifteen pixies blocked their way. “We don’t make it a habit of repeating ourselves around here.”

“Fine,” said Clara. “But we request an audience with you tomorrow.”

“Nope.” Bob shook his head. “You can see me on Friday like the rest of the public. Halloween is tomorrow and I don’t have time for you. But if I see you around the post office trying anything funny, you will be on the first flight to Salem.”

“This is ridiculous,” the redhead mumbled. “Eric, aren’t you coming?”

“No.” Eric waved at them. “Remember, I’m just a hired gun for Virginia. This is really my home. Enjoy the Hilton.”

Pete and his kids pushed the witches out of the building, allowing the rest to breathe easier.

“What in the hell was that all about?” Shorty asked Eric once he was sure the rest of the witches were gone.

Eric took off the hood and adjusted his suit. “These things are ridiculous. How is my hair?”

“Perfect, like usual,” Bob told him, marching over to check the security cameras in the building's front. “Now, seriously, what is going on?”

“Short version or long?” Eric asked, wiping off lint from his pants.

“In between,” said Bob. “Your short versions are too short at times.”

“You have just met the Inquisitors of the Order,” Eric announced.

“That sounds awful,” Bob mentioned.

“You don’t know the half of it,” Eric agreed. “According to them, they are testing the relationship of the Order. Except they are learning slowly that the only relationships we have are the ones made by Virginia. Something they are not happy about.”

“And their plan is to bully people to conform with them?” Shorty asked, glaring out the window.

“That’s what they thought would happen.” Eric smiled. “They just had no idea how strong Virginia’s allies are. I’m impressed by that show of force. Were you really going to attack them?”

“I’ll be damned if a bunch of strangers come to my town to give orders,” Bob replied.

“Death made a splendid choice making you intern.” Eric tossed the hood to the young officer. “Would you mind burning that for me, please?”

“Yes, sir?” The officer looked at Bob for guidance, who nodded.

“Are you staying for the holiday?” Shorty asked. “We are doing a float at the parade.”

“I can’t,” he replied. “Got a lead in New Orleans. Heading that way. Virginia asked me to watch those clowns. It gave me a reason to stop by. Could I get a ride to the airport? Need to get a rental.”

“I have a better plan,” said Bob. “Take one of ours from the garage, and you can return it on the way back.”

“Deal.” Eric and Bob shook hands.

“Let’s go, James Bond,” Shorty teased his friend.

“Don’t tell me you don’t like the suit?” Eric asked as he followed Shorty down the hall.

“You look like a male model . . .”

Bob couldn't hear the rest of Shorty's statement, but he was sure he was picking on their friend. Silence had returned to the foyer, and Bob took several deep breaths. The young officer leaned against his chair, staring at the monitor.

“You did great today,” Bob told him, approaching slowly.

“I was scared out of my mind, boss.” The young man's hands were shaking, but he stood straight, shoulders back.

“We are in a dangerous business.” Bob squeezed the officer's shoulder. “Never forget it. It's not about being brave or reckless. Sometimes, we just need to do things afraid.”

The officer nodded.

“Go take a break,” Bob told him.

“But the front.”

“I can watch it while you are gone.” Bob gave him a small smile. “Just bring me back a cookie. I was told the doctor baked some killer chocolate chip.”

That made the officer perk up. “On it, boss.”

He hurried down the hall, trying not to run. Bob made himself comfortable on the seat and disengaged the scythe. With the adrenaline gone, his chest hurt, but he embraced it. It was a solitary reminder that he was still alive. Raising his feet on the desk, he realized he meant every word. He would take on a group of witches to protect his domain.

Sergeant Bob is back.

Chapter Twenty-Four



Nikita had spent most of the evening trailing Roy all over the Four-States area.

Who does he think he is?

Nikita asked herself for the tenth time that night. The guy had a very busy social schedule, as Nikita found out. Three different girlfriends, in three different cities. Not a hard thing to do in the area, since four states connected here. The impressive part was how unconcerned he was about hiding his movements.

He met with a witch in Hooks at a local diner. Drove to Texarkana to have coffee with a shifter at a shop in downtown. Then had the nerve to drive to the Arkansas side to have beers with a poor human girl who was still wearing braces. While the area was fairly spread out, it wasn't that big. This was definitely not New York City. Eventually, all these girls would see each other or someone would make a comment.

Nikita wasn't sure if the guy was brave or an idiot. Maybe he just had a death wish, and she was about to do him a favor. The idea of messing around with all those women made her sick.

How does he keep them straight? she wondered. Does he work?

Her mind was full of questions, something she rarely did for her targets. On normal occasions, it was all the same. She picked one. If the little pup fell for the cute, innocent act, then it was on. At other times, when the job mixed with her own interests, the process was easier. She eliminated the

target given to her. It had been a very long time since she had to tag a mark for this long, but Roy just didn't stay still alone long enough for anything.

They were back at the club. Nikita didn't have the time or energy to go back inside. Two nights in a row at the same location would definitely make a statement. Instead, she went around the back and met one of the waitresses. The pay at the place couldn't have been too great, since a one-hundred-dollar bill got her a new accomplice.

"I really need to talk to him," Nikita had told the young lady. "I'm pregnant and my parents are going to kill me."

The last part did the trick. The waitress agreed to hand him the note. Nikita tossed the wig she had been wearing on top of her backpack. If anyone went asking questions, they would be busy looking for a sad, homely brunette with glasses.

"No need to take chances," she told herself.

Adjusting the sight to the .22 Long Rifle, she made herself comfortable in the bed of the black truck she had climbed in. She had parked her car a few miles from the club. Driving her car was out of the question. Nothing needed to connect her with this incident. She took in the distance one more time. It was at least twenty-five yards from the door. An easy shot for her, especially with the rifle.

Guns were not her favorite method of action. They were too loud and brutal. The way the bodies were torn apart was a waste in her mind. She enjoyed the jobs to be neat. Having loose threads was another one of her pet-peeves, the reason she was stalking Roy at ten at night.

Movement from the door caught her eye, and she looked through the rifle. Roy walked out, but he wasn't alone. Two of his guards were on his tail.

"You didn't take them with you when you were being Romeo all over the city," Nikita pointed out. "What to do?"

It took her less than three seconds to decide. She opened fire on all three men. Taking advantage of the fact that the .22 rounds were sub-sonic, making them almost impossible to detect, Nikita took out Roy first. Roy stumbled backwards and slammed against the brick wall. The two men next to him did not know what hit him.

They pulled out guns, searching for attackers. Nikita put two rounds in one and three in the other. The third man squeezed his trigger and sprayed several of the vehicles in front of him. Alarms blared and Nikita slid off the

truck. Keeping a low profile, she left the scene and crept towards her vehicle.



Late night calls from his informants at the human police department were coming too often for Bob's taste. None of them were good, especially late-night ones. When the calls involved fatalities, those were even worse. Bob pulled up to the parking lot of Whiskey River. The Texarkana police had to secure the area. Only a few vehicles remained in the lot, besides the first responders.

Many of the local law enforcement were friends with Bob, but that didn't mean they would have allowed him to enter an active crime scene. It was time to bring back Mr. Smith, Bob's favorite identity. All it took was one disguise spell from the elves, and Bob was a different person. A shorter man, with thinning black hair and a beer belly.

Bob took a clipboard from the passenger side, a pair of large rim glasses especially made for him, and a small badge from the visor. Mr. Smith, forensics consultant, was ready for duty. He stepped out of his truck and headed toward the crime scene. A male witch, in a Texarkana police uniform, met him at the edge of the police tape.

"Boss, is that you?" asked the witch.

"Don't I look great?" Bob replied.

"That spell is amazing," he told him. "Would you mind letting me analyze it in the morning? I think I can manufacture us some more."

"Absolutely. Stop by my office in the morning. By the way, thank you for getting me in."

"Having the famous forensic consultant on speed dial makes you very popular around the force," the witch replied.

The fake identity had been Bartholomew's idea. Using many of his computer skills, Bartholomew created the perfect cover for Bob. A retired forensics expert from the Dallas Fort Worth area, who would help with the authorities when they needed him.

"Mr. Smith," a man in his mid-forties approached Bob. "You honestly didn't have to come out this evening. Nothing out of the ordinary here."

Bob scanned the area. Three bodies lay on stretchers covered in blankets.

“Are you telling me, detective, three dead is a normal thing for this area?”

“That’s not what I meant,” replied the detective quickly. “It’s just a drive by shooting. Gang related.”

“I didn’t know Texarkana had a gang problem,” said Bob, slowly making his way towards the scene of the crime.

“We hadn’t, but with all the new people moving into town, we are seeing many strange things.” The detective moved towards the stretchers. “We were watching this one for a while.” He lifted the blanket from Roy.

“Who is it?” asked Bob, letting his senses examine the corpse without opening his third eye to the supernatural world. Something he learned to avoid in front of humans.

“*Shifter.*” Bob could confirm. Looking closely at the body, he tapped the side of his glasses and snapped a photo.

“*Thank God for Bartholomew and his millions of gadgets.*”

“For such a young one, he was busy.” The detective dropped the blanket down. “It seems he was running a trafficking ring with his buddies. We didn’t have enough evidence to make a move, but we were building a case. It seems somebody took matters into their own hands.”

“And those two?” Bob pointed at the two other stretchers.

“We haven’t been able to identify them.” The detective lifted the covers of both corpses, giving Bob time to take pictures of both. “Nobody seems to recognize them.”

“Well, if you don’t need any help, I’ll be on my way,” Bob told him.

“Are you planning to stay around town?” the detective asked, glancing at the scene.

“I could stay for a few days if you need me.” Bob adjusted the glasses to take in the entire scene. “Heading to Hope to visit my sick mother.”

“No big deal, really.”

“What’s bothering you?” Bob held his clipboard tight and waited.

“The scene looks like a drive by shooting,” the detective pointed out. “But we have no tracks, no ammunition cases, no marks.”

Bob spun around the parking lot. “Did you inspect all the vehicles that were here before they left?”

“We questioned everyone that was in the club,” the detective answered. “All the owners of the vehicles were inside when the shooting took place. Why?”

“Maybe the shooter didn’t fire from their own vehicle, but one already here,” Bob said softly. *That’s what I would do*, he finished the thought to himself.

“Maybe.” The detective examined the empty parking lot for the missed opportunity. “Well, Mr. Smith. Thank you for coming.”

“Anytime, detective.” The two men shook hands, and Bob returned to his truck.

Inside his truck, and sure he could not be overheard, he called Reapers. “Please tell me you got all that.”

“Are you questioning my skills?” Bartholomew replied.

“Me? Never?” Bob fired back and pulled out of the parking lot. “What did you find?”

“I don’t like the idea of a trafficking ring in Texarkana,” Bartholomew replied. “Running a background check on all three corpses. The first photo you sent was of a werewolf that moved to Haven recently. Roy Jackson. The other two were witches, but none registered with us.”

“We need to do something about that,” said Bob.

“On it.” Bartholomew was quickly typing on his end. “Sending a message to all the heads of each supernatural community in Haven. A very nice reminder of the requirements to register, follow the rules, as well as the consequences in place for breaking the law.”

“Is that going to be enough?” Bob tapped his steering wheel.

“You know it’s not.” Bartholomew kept on typing. “Reason I’m inviting them to a mandatory town hall with Constantine. It is time for our fearless leaders to set down the law.”

“They will not like me when I’m mad,” Constantine announced, making Bob shake his head.

“I’m stopping by the Station,” Bob informed them. “Going to give the night watch a heads up of potential problems. See if you find out who those two witches were, and what is really going on. We don’t need any of that in our town.”

“You got it.” Bartholomew disconnected the call.

Bob took off the glasses and placed them back on the visor. From the cup holder, he pulled up a small vial of glowing liquid and drank it. Years earlier, he would have fussed at Isis for drinking strange potions. Now he was chugging them without a problem. How much his life had changed.

Chapter Twenty-Five



Nikita sat on the edge of the bed in the dark bedroom. She rarely used that room. Thick curtains covered the large windows and most of the walls. A few months ago, she had added noise cancellation foam to most of the walls. The curtains were necessary to cover the extra buffing. The room smelled like sex and incense. For a moment, the idea of airing out the room crossed her mind, but Will's sleeping form on the bed changed it.

He took over most of the bed. It surprised her how hard she had to work to get him in the house. The man was genuine to his word and wanted nothing from her. But he wasn't the rule, just the exception.

"Maybe you were one of the few good ones." She caressed his face. "Too bad the world will never know."

She made her way toward the dresser and pulled out a small vial from the drawer. Her shipment from Mickey had arrived. Four vials of his latest poison, a concoction Nikita had no idea what was in it, three sedatives, and even a potion for wrinkles.

How old did Mickey think she was? Nikita asked herself, tossing that potion to the side.

Sitting next to the naked man, she carefully opened his mouth. It was strange how gentle he had been. Maybe he truly believed he was making love. Nikita didn't care. His kind were a plague upon the earth.

Focusing on the task at hand, she squeezed several drops of the dark liquid into Will's mouth. The sedative would last at least ten hours. His body needed to be discovered during the middle of the parade. If her

sources inside Reapers were correct, the tension between the packs was at its peak. Will's body would be the tipping point for the war to start. Haven would be in too much chaos for anyone looking for her.

Nikita didn't bother covering the man, she left the room naked and headed towards the living room. The blinking light of her cell phone caught her attention. It was barely six in the morning, nobody ever dared to bother her at this hour.

"It's done," Mickey told her as soon as she answered.

"Please elaborate, because that can mean many things," she told him.

"At eleven-fifteen eastern standard time, your body was found dead on I-95 en route to Boston." Nikita took a seat at the sound of the news.

"Who knows?"

"At least three of the agencies that seemed to have a hit on your ass," he replied. "If I knew how many people would pay for your head, I might have done the deed myself."

"But would you risk losing such an asset for money?"

Mickey laughed. "I have done many things for money. One lost assassin would not be the worst of it."

"Spoken like a true mercenary."

"A capitalist," Mickey corrected her. "Just a capitalist."

Nikita walked to the kitchen, and from the cupboard pulled out her laptop.

"When should I be expecting you?" Mickey asked.

"I have one small thing to take care of tomorrow," she replied, searching the black web. "Should be there no later than Friday morning."

"Looking forward to our new partnership," Mickey told her.

"Me, too," said Nikita, and disconnected the line.

It didn't take her long to find what she was looking for. Three different hit teams were claiming the kill. It seemed her own handler had placed the bounty, claiming she had disobeyed orders and gone rogue.

"Not bad, Janet."

Nikita checked her Jamaican bank account. The payment for her last job had gone through. Three and a half million Euros were peacefully sitting in that account.

"Such a waste," Nikita told herself, but activated her last will and testament.

Everyone had a security policy, Nikita had several. The day she disappeared she had planned to take everyone with her.

“Sorry, Mickey, nothing personal,” she said to the screen as she input the names of her hit list. The law office of Johnson and Jones had a copy of her will, as well as access to all the funds in that account. The funds would be distributed to the ones who brought proof of the death of the individuals in that email. Names were updated monthly, depending on the last job.

Nikita honestly had nothing against Mickey, or even Janet, but she hated to be double-crossed. In their line of business, assassins were only tools to be disposed of as soon as they were done with. She had been planning to disappear for a very long time. This meant cleaning up her loose ends and paying back any potential debt.

She had one job in life, and it was to make sure *she* was always safe. That had changed with all the new packs moving to Haven. It wasn't supposed to be this way. The intern was supposed to keep order, but they were failing. With the increase in the number of werewolf packs, came more powerful enemies. Haven was growing each day more out of control. It was ironic Nikita failed to see the part she played in the mayhem that was taking place. With the death of Will, war would start among the werewolves and again, people would die. She needed to get her sister out of there.

Chapter Twenty-Six



The door to the loft slammed open as Bob rushed in. “Boss, what’s going on?”

“Glad you made it,” Constantine said, as he sat on top of the kitchen island. With his paw he pointed behind him.

“You said it was an emergency.” Bob moved cautiously towards the back.

“We have a situation.” Bartholomew corrected him from his command post.

“My grandson is missing.” Mrs. Ella stood from the kitchen chair and marched over to Bob. “They are blaming him for the death of that idiot Roy.”

“Can we slow down here?” Bob raised his hand. “Let’s start from the beginning.”

Mrs. Ella moved in front of the glass wall in the loft, motionless for several seconds. Bob glanced between Constantine and Bartholomew, but they only shook their heads.

“My grandson never made it home from the concert on Tuesday,” Mrs. Ella finally replied.

“Is that normal?” Bob took a seat at the table.

“Not Will,” she replied. “Unlike his wild father, Will is the responsible one in the family.”

Bob raised an eyebrow at that.

“Don’t take me for a fool,” she chastised him. “I’m not blind or naïve enough to not know what my people do. I can admit their faults and

strengths. Will is my hope for the clan. But nobody has seen him since Tuesday night.”

“Then why is he being blamed for the death of who?” Bob asked more calmly.

“Roy,” she repeated. “He was the werewolf that was gunned down last night. It seemed Will and Roy had an altercation over a girl on Tuesday. Roy had put a bounty on Will for taking the girl. Rumor has it Will took action first and had Roy killed.”

“Wow,” said Bartholomew from his post. “That is officially the best theory I have heard all week.”

“But I’m assuming that is not the case?” Constantine jumped in.

“That is not Will’s style.” Ella sat back on the chair next to Bob. “If Will had a problem with another shifter, he would challenge them to a fight. One on one. He wouldn’t be setting up hits on anyone. That’s the stuff you hear about in the big cities. Not in Texarkana.”

“But you still don’t know where he is?” Bob confirmed.

She shook her head.

“That means you do not know what he has done, or what really happened,” he pushed on.

“I’m still the matriarch of this clan.” Ella slapped the table, making it shake. “If anyone is holding something back from me, the punishment would not be pretty. No, Mr. Bob, while I can’t confirm anything, I know my grandson. He didn’t do it.”

“Does anyone know who the girl is?” Bartholomew changed the topic.

“That’s the other mystery,” she confessed. “Nobody from Roy’s crew recognized her. Just a girl with strawberry-blonde hair and blue eyes. Gorgeous. They weren’t even sure if she was human or not.”

“Well, that’s not helpful,” Constantine informed them.

Bartholomew shook his head but made a few notes on his laptop.

“What was Will driving Tuesday?” Bob asked.

“His truck,” Ella answered, but quickly raised her hand. “Before you ask, we found his truck and his cell in front of the First Baptist Church on Morris Lane Wednesday morning.”

“Was the truck clean?” Bob leaned in.

“Are you asking if it had any blood?”

“That, too, but I was looking more for fingerprints.” Bob was at the edge of his seat.

“We didn’t inspect for it.” She lowered her face. “I know what you said about a war, Master Constantine, but,” she raised her face and her eyes glistened with tears, “if something happens to Will, the world can burn, but I will hunt everyone responsible for his death.”

“Have you ever considered someone is trying to start a war between the packs?” Bob asked her.

“Well, they are doing a great job.” Ella rose from her chair. “I’m giving you an opportunity to make this right. But if we find who did this first, I’ll make them pay.”

They watched her leave the loft with her head held high. Even in her pain, Mrs. Ella was the perfect picture of grace.

“I have people checking every park for another potential body,” said Bob, after the door closed behind Mrs. Ella. “Nothing has come up.”

“Let’s hope she finds nothing, as well,” Constantine told him, jumping from the counter to the table. “Where were you all morning? I stalled her as much as possible, but she finally came by herself.”

“Setting up extra security all over the parade route,” Bob explained. “Got calls from both the Texas and Arkansas police departments. They were getting bomb threats over the route.”

“Are they planning to cancel the parade?” Constantine asked.

“That would be the smart thing to do.”

“But,” Bartholomew finished for him.

“But we have over five thousand tourists in town for this parade.”

“Why?” Constantine screamed.

“The Arkansas side is closing the entertainment district at one to start the celebration,” Bob continued. “They have street vendors all over the route, and tons of food trucks already set up downtown. This is now a full-on festival.”

“It’s a Thursday! Why aren’t people at work?” Constantine complained.

“Are schools closed?” Bartholomew added.

“Seriously? Does it look like I know all that?”

“This is horrible.” Bartholomew stated to everyone.

The door for the loft slammed open again, and this time Eugene busted through the door. “Snake poison!”

“Excuse us? What?” Bob asked, looking at the enraged Eugene.

“We were framed!” Eugene shouted.

“That seems to be the common theme today,” Bartholomew informed him. “Who framed you, and why?”

“The killer.”

Bob covered his eyes with his hands. “Why doesn’t anyone speak in complete sentences and from the beginning?”

“Eugene, we are not following you. What are you talking about?” Constantine asked the young man. “Rewind this whole thing and start over.”

“Who still rewinds things?” Eugene asked instead.

“Focus, Eugene, or Bob might strangle you,” Bartholomew warned him.

“Sorry about that.” Eugene waved his hands in the air. “I took back the three samples Doctor Angela gave me.” Using his hands, Bartholomew encouraged Eugene to speed up. “Yes, there were traces of Ecstasy, but it wasn’t ours. And it wasn’t what killed those men.” Eugene stopped to face the group.

“Eugene, if you don’t spill it, I’m going to use your back as a scratching post,” Constantine threatened.

“I’m trying to build the anticipation,” he told them.

“Get it over with,” Bob ordered.

“Fine.” Eugene started pacing around the table. “The Ecstasy was probably used to cover the traces of the Black Mamba venom and the other toxins we found.”

“You were serious. Snake venom killed them.” Bartholomew scrounged up his face in disgust.

“Not really,” Eugene replied rubbing his cheek. “Snake venom consume is non-toxic, but it was the use of it that made us curious.”

“How did we not find it?” Bob questioned him.

“It wasn’t easy. Whoever made this concoction is a pro, and with lots of magic,” Eugene continued. “The traces were almost invisible. It wasn’t until we found it in the most recent victim that we could detect in the others by searching for the venom.”

“That means this poison is rare?” Bartholomew asked.

“Rare and expensive,” Eugene told them. “Whoever your killer is, they are good. With friends in very dangerous places.”

“Eugene, we need to find this person now,” Bob informed him.

“Okay.” Eugene looked around the room. “What do you want me to do about it?”

“Can you trace the poison to its source?” Bob asked.

“You have been watching way too much TV,” Eugene told him. “I barely found enough traces of it in their system. I had to get Angela to send me more samples. You want me to trace that to what? A random killer?”

“Yes?” Bob shrugged.

“Do I look like I have a crystal ball somewhere?”

“Don’t you know people?” Constantine jumped in. “You guys run the CDC. I’m sure there are some illegal labs registered you could track down.”

“It doesn’t work like . . .” Eugene stopped talking and pulled out his phone.

“Eugene?” Constantine asked softly.

“I.” Eugene was busy searching his phone. “That is random.”

“What?” Bob was on his feet next to Eugene.

“I actually know someone who specializes in snake venoms and exotic poisons.” Eugene showed them a picture on his phone. “He is expensive and has a very long wait list.”

“That’s perfect,” said Bob. “Call him.”

“Yeah, about that.” Eugene kicked the air with his foot. “I’m kind of blocked.”

“How can you be kind of blocked?” Bartholomew asked.

“I accidentally mentioned his name to the mistress.” Eugene tapped his lips with his finger. “Well, I was more bragging about how good he was with toxins as a free agent. Did I mention the mistress does not like competition?”

“Did she kill him?” Bartholomew asked.

“Worse?”

“What could be worse than death?” Bob jumped in.

“Herpes.”

“I completely understand why you are blocked,” Constantine told him.

“Now what?” Bob asked, shaking his head.

“This can’t be good,” Isis told them as she walked into the room.

“Isis!” Bartholomew rushed his sister. “How was the tea party?”

“Nobody died, so a huge success,” Isis told him. “What are you all plotting?” She went directly to the fridge and pulled out a bowl of cherries.

“We are trying to stop a potential war, and we almost had a lead but lost it,” Bob recapped for her.

“That sounds awful in so many ways,” Isis told them.

"I need to get back to the Station before this parade starts, or the war kicks off," said Bob. "Bartholomew, I could really use your help on the ground."

"Absolutely." Bartholomew saluted.

"I can use the drone to monitor the streets," Constantine volunteered.

"That would be a great help, boss."

"Do you think we will need Angela and TJ on standby?" Bartholomew asked.

Bob thought about it for a minute. "Let's not call them in yet. TJ finally had the evening off, and he was planning on asking Abby to the parade. She was pretty upset after the Order arrived."

"Is she okay?" Isis asked.

"She hasn't had the best experience with that group," Bob explained.

"Who has?" Isis continued. "TJ would be good for her."

"That's what I said," Bartholomew approved.

"Besides, if we end up needing medical support, he would be right there anyway," Bob told them.

"Maybe if I just showed up at his door," Eugene muttered to himself.

"Whose door?" Isis asked Eugene as she moved next to him.

"The toxin dealer in New York." Eugene smiled at his old friend. "I just need to figure out how to get there and back before another werewolf is killed. By the way, you are looking gorgeous, Isis."

"Thank you. But do you need a ride?" Isis asked him.

"What?"

"To New York City?" she added. "You do remember I can teleport?"

"You can do that!" Eugene shouted.

"I'm pretty good at it. Unless, Bob, you'd rather I help here?"

Everyone turned to face Bob, who realized this was his operation. "Actually, no." Bob shook his head. "That is a brilliant idea. Isis, you and Eugene head to New York and see if you can find this toxin dealer and get some answers from him. Maybe we get lucky, and he knows the name of our killer."

"My pleasure," said Isis. "Let me change out of this dress and I'll be ready in five."

"I'll be right here." Eugene took a seat by the table and placed his phone down. "Do you think he would still be mad to see me?"

“Considering your boss gave him the gift that keeps on giving, I would say yes,” Constantine informed him. “Hopefully, this is the last time you need his services.”

“I hope so, too,” Eugene leaned back in the chair. “I can make coffee while we wait.”

“Eugene do not touch my kitchen appliances,” Bob warned the scientist. “Grab some juice from the fridge instead. Boss, let me know when you are ready to broadcast with the drone.”

“Will do. Be careful with the shifters.”

Bob saluted the cat and marched out the door.

“Meet you at the Station!” Bartholomew shouted.

“Make sure you are teleporting only in your office,” Bob reminded him. “I do not need any more scared people today.”

Bob took the stairs two at a time, trying to head back. He could have teleported back with Bartholomew, but he needed his vehicle. With all the strange things happening in Haven, the more firepower he could carry, the better he would feel. He really was hoping they didn’t find poor Will dead this evening.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



Cars roamed the downtown area en masse. A very unusual thing for a Thursday, but there was nothing unusual about Halloween. Slowly, the shifter community was reclaiming the holiday and making it more mainstream in the once conservative town. Bartholomew stared out the window of his office at all the cars driving around in front of them. People were searching for parking spaces everywhere and they didn't care how close to the local human jail they parked.

Bartholomew switched his zombie apocalypse t-shirt for a Reapers Inc jacket with a lot more pockets. He packed his tranquilizer guns inside the jacket. With his skater shirts and Converse shoes, he was a cross between Pharrell the rapper and one of those TV special agents. At this point, it was too late to question his clothes selection. Instead, he rushed out the door and down the stairs.

In the main foyer of the Station, Pete the Pixie was directing the troops out the door.

"Bart, what are you doing here?" Pete asked.

"Put me to work," he answered. "Where do you need me?"

"Head out to Main Street near the Perot Theater," Pete informed him, checking his pixie-size clipboard. "For some reason, that area always gets hit the worst."

"On it." Bartholomew ran down the steps of the Station towards his duty location.

Outside the Station Bartholomew crashed right into TJ, who was waving at the passing cars.

“Ouch,” TJ shouted. “Watch it!”

“TJ!” Bartholomew shouted back. “Why are you standing in front of the door?”

“I’m waiting for Abby and sharing southern hospitality with people.” TJ pointed at all the drivers. “These people are rude. I’m surprised they didn’t flip me off.”

“Have you considered we have tons of tourists, and they think you are flipping them off, too?” Bartholomew glanced around the street.

“No way.” TJ waved away the suggestion. “But why are you running into me?”

“I’m off to help the crew. Bob wants as many of us on full patrol as possible.”

“Do you need our help?” Abby asked from behind, making both Bartholomew and TJ jump.

“Girl, how are you so sneaky?” Bartholomew asked, holding his chest.

“Years of practice.” Abby beamed at him. “But seriously, how can we help?”

“Bob said you are both off for the night. Go check out the parade.”

“I have never been to a Halloween parade or party, so I’m sure I’ll be fine if I miss it,” Abby told him.

“I would like to say you aren’t missing much, but not really,” TJ informed her. “Most celebrations in Texarkana, before the Reaper crew moved down, were tiny and intimate. Nobody who was in the supernatural community talked about it or even associated with each other.”

“That sounds lonely,” said Abby.

“Never lonely,” TJ admitted. “Just human.”

“Which means it would be a great time to enjoy being a bit on the supernatural side,” Bartholomew announced, pushing both of them away from the Station.

“Fine, but we are just swinging by my apartment to pick up some folding chairs to watch the parade.” Abby pointed down the street. “We will be on the route.”

“Are you still at the Lofts around the corner from City Hall?” Bartholomew asked, walking behind them.

“Yes.” Abby nodded.

“You should be close to the action,” he admitted. “If you stay near the city hall area and if something comes up, you are both close enough to help. Just take this.”

Bartholomew pulled one of his tranquilizer guns from his jacket, making sure none of the civilians saw him. TJ shook his head.

“I don’t need that.” He shifted his right hand into a claw and back to his hand.

Bartholomew nodded in approval. Abby gasped.

“Don’t be afraid to use it,” Bartholomew reminded him. “It’s going to be nuts today. But you need it.” He passed the gun to Abby.

“I don’t know how to use a gun,” she said with trembling hands.

“Good news. The only thing this has is tranquilizer pellets.” Bartholomew placed the gun in her hand. “Take the safety off, aim and shoot. You will not kill them, but it will buy you time to run away if something breaks down. Got it?”

Abby nodded and took the gun. She quickly put it in her handbag and looked around. “Is it going to be that bad?”

“I hope not, but I’m not taking any chances of losing you two. TJ, keep an eye on her.”

“Absolutely.”

“Be careful and have fun.” Bartholomew gave the pair one last push.

TJ glanced back and waved. Bartholomew gave his friend a big thumbs up. TJ shook his head and walked away with Abby.

“It’s about time those two went out,” Bartholomew told himself, as he adjusted his jacket. “Time to get to work.”

He took off at a light jog down the street towards State Line. He might as well check out the area while he was heading towards his destination.



By five o’clock, the streets of downtown were a madhouse. Bartholomew dodged and weaved between tourists and locals all down Fourth Street. The staging area for the parade was in the parking lot of Beech Street, between the three large churches.

“Am I the only one who is having horrible déjà vu feelings about this?” he asked on the net. Bob had required everyone on duty to use earpieces to

communicate.

Fortunately for the team, Bartholomew had found a professional set that just looked like Bluetooth headsets, instead of the wired ones all the secret agents in movies wore.

“As long as this parade doesn’t end with us fighting hell beasts and demons, I’m good,” Shorty told him from his end.

“And you are not on a float dressed like PSY singing Gangnam Style,” Bob reminded him. “Going with nope, nothing like it.”

“Do you still have that suit?” Triplet-3 jumped in.

“Yes,” Bartholomew replied, rolling his eyes. “And it comes down to my calves now. Remember, I was two feet shorter than I am now.”

“You were so small back then,” Triplet-1 added.

“Wasn’t he adorable in those days, with those big, brown curls?” Shorty teased.

“Back then? He still has those curls. He just combs his hair now,” Triplet-2 joined the fun.

“Don’t you all have some security to do?” Bartholomew interrupted them.

“I’m working here,” Shorty complained.

“Relax, everyone,” Bob’s calm voice broke through the chatter. “I get it. Everyone is on edge, and we have a lot of civilians running around that could easily become potential casualties. I need everyone to stay focused and stop hating on Bartholomew’s hair. Not his fault it’s perfect.”

“You are not helping,” Bartholomew told him, but he had relaxed.

There was something calming about Bob’s voice. Bartholomew wasn’t sure if this was Death’s gifts coming across or just Bob’s power of leadership. Regardless, he felt focused.

The parade was scheduled to start at six-thirty, followed by a night festival by the train tracks. The organizers from Universal Vibe had teamed up with the planning committee and were bringing the fire dancers. That presentation was always a tremendous hit with everyone in town. Bartholomew just hoped they made it to the night festivities with no incidents.

In every corner of the downtown area, there were at least two of Bob’s team stationed. Few were dressed as transients, others as drunks and party goers, or housewives pushing strollers, couples holding hands, and the occasional grandma reading palms. If you were not part of the inner

workings of the Reapers, you would have missed the diverse collection of spies the team had accumulated. Many of them no longer lived near the Station, but they were all still on the payroll for occasions just like this.

It had been Isis's dream to help the community. Bob had made that dream a reality by changing the lives of so many. But Bartholomew was sure neither of them understood the impact of their work on the town. The members of their team had a purpose, and they were committed to protecting their new home. Bartholomew gave them a small salute as they passed him by. They all stayed in character, but always nodded back.

"Boss, we have incoming," Triplet-2 announced.

"What do you have?" replied Bob.

Bartholomew froze on the corner of Main and Second, watching the crowd.

"Coming down Stateline, the witches," Triplet-2 told them.

"I got the witches," said Bob. "Everyone, stay alert for werewolves."

Candy Cone vendors and Italian ice carts passed quickly by Bartholomew. It had been ages since he last saw carts like that. He was used to seeing them when he lived in New York City with Death's previous intern.

"That has been years," Bartholomew told himself. It was before Isis, and back then, interns changed locations every three months. They were also going through interns just as fast.

"I might need backup," the high-pitched voice of Little J broke Bartholomew's thoughts.

"What's going on?" Bartholomew asked first.

"I have . . ." screams cut off Little J's report.

"Where are you?" Bartholomew asked.

"Little J is at the staging area on Beech Street," Shorty replied.

"I'm on my way," Bartholomew told them.

"We will meet you there as soon as we can," Shorty replied.

Bartholomew didn't wait to see when that would be. He took off running. Teleporting in the middle of the city full of civilians was a recipe for disaster. He could still cover more ground than anyone in their group, at least the human part. The shifters in the team were just as fast, and some even faster than he was.

"I'm two blocks away," the sexy voice of Ruby came through the net.

“Where have you been?” Bartholomew asked, not even out of breath as he dashed towards the churches’ parking lot.

“Training,” she answered. Bartholomew could hear the wind blowing across her mic as she ran. “Who do you think is training the new recruits? Obviously not you.”

Ruby was one of Bartholomew’s favorite officers. She was efficient, talented, and moving up in the ranks fast. Bob had turned over the training of all new recruits to her, and she was doing a great job. Unfortunately, with the increased number of people joining them, Bob had moved the training site to a new compound in New Boston. With over fifty acres of land, the recruits could truly be trained in all forms of combats situations. That also meant Ruby was hardly around.

Bartholomew reached the staging area in time to see the fight starting. Three shifters in bright-orange shirts were moving fast on two smaller ones wearing green-camouflaged pants, with Little J smack in the middle. One shifter in orange moved at that inhuman speed of theirs and took a punch at Little J.

“Christ!” Bartholomew shouted. He Increased his speed as he worried he wouldn’t make it in time. Little J was human, and a punch like that would surely crack his skull.

Little J, frozen in front of the fist flying his way, was too slow to duck. Bartholomew rushed, but he was still several feet away. Ruby, long, brown hair tight in a ponytail, stepped in front of Little J, and landed a right hook on the incoming shifter. Before the shifter could recover, she delivered a kick to the stomach, sending him stumbling back.

“Didn’t your mother teach you some manners?” she demanded, adjusting her combat stance.

Bartholomew reached Ruby and Little J in time for the shifter to recover. “Nice skirt.” Bartholomew told Ruby.

“It’s a skort,” she corrected him.

“A what?”

Ruby raised the front of her skirt to show off a pair of shorts connected to it.

“Here I thought you were flashing people as you kicked them to the next zip code,” Bartholomew teased as he blocked the next shifter rushing at them.

“Not today,” Ruby told him, doing a roundhouse and connecting with Bartholomew’s assailant. “Little J, stop staring and clear out those people.”

Ruby’s orders brought Little J back to reality. He rushed to the two smaller shifters in camouflage pants. They were barely teenagers. One with freckles, the other with a multicolored mohawk. “We need to go,” he told them.

“Not so fast,” a male shifter in another one of those hideous orange shirts blocked their way, as two more of his friends walked slowly towards them. “We have some words for these two.”

“Sure, you do.” Little J smiled and pulled out his tranquilizer gun. With no warning, he shot the shifter in front of him with two shots to the chest, taking him out.

“What the . . .?” his friends screamed, but Little J unloaded the remaining rounds on those two, knocking them out as well.

“Are they alive?” the freckled kid asked.

“They will be fine,” Little J informed them. “Besides a pounding headache and maybe a temporary case of baldness, but nothing permanent.”

“That was awesome,” his friend with the Mohawk told him.

“Not awesome,” Little J corrected him.

“Why are you still here?” Ruby asked, getting ready to tackle another half-dozen men heading their way.

“I’m just more afraid of her than I will ever be of them.” Glancing over his shoulder, he waved at his sergeant. “Moving, sergeant.” He dragged the kids with him as more shifters rushed the area. “Sarge!” Little J stopped. “We got a problem.”

Bartholomew spun around. They were being surrounded by shifters. The humans in the area noticed the trouble and had cleared out. Unfortunately, Little J was trapped between them and too many of those orange-wearing maniacs.

“We need to get those kids out of here before real bloodshed happens,” Bartholomew told Ruby.

“Please tell me you have a plan,” she said, moving slowly backward to join Little J and the teens. “Because I’m not sure if we can hold them off for much longer.”

“They are not interested in us,” Bartholomew clarified. “Just messing with the other packs.”

“And?” Ruby eyed the growing shifters. “We can’t fight them and protect those kids at the same time. One of them will break through.”

“Then let’s get the kids out.” Bartholomew winked at her. “Little J, how much ammunition you have left?”

“Two full magazines, Mr. Bart,” he said, dragging the kids back to his superiors.

“Ruby, take my guns.” Bartholomew handed her both of his tranquilizers.

“Bartholomew, what are you planning?”

“Just following Little J’s inspiration,” he said softly. “I’ll be gone thirty seconds. As soon as I’m gone, open fire on everyone standing.”

“Now, that I can do,” Ruby said with a smirk. “Little J, just like we drilled. As soon as Bart clears the area on my six, open fire.”

“What about us?” the teen with the freckles asked.

“You hold on to me for dear life and try not to puke on my shoes on the other side.”

Ruby shook her head but smiled. “Little J, get ready.”

“Let’s give the bitches hell.” Little J adjusted his guns.

“Save me some,” Bartholomew told them.

“Go!” Ruby shouted and opened fire on the shifters.

Bartholomew blinked out of existence, dragging the teenagers with him.

In a blink of an eye, they were standing in the main foyer of Union Station.

“Holy hell,” the freckled boy said, dropping to his knees.

“I’m going to die,” the other one said, turning to vomit on the floor.

“Glad you missed my shoes.” Bartholomew hopped away from the boys.

“What in all creation is going on here?” Pete shouted, as the new officer on duty watched the kids with disgust.

“I’m not cleaning that.” The officer pointed to the ground and the two puddles of horrible meat residue.

“Bartholomew, you know the rules,” Pete floated next to the Reaper.

“Improvising here,” Bartholomew explained. “Not sure which pack they belong to, but please make sure they are returned to their respective group. I’ll probably be back with more.”

“Damn,” said Pete. “Is the fighting started?”

“Not if we can help it.”

“We got you,” Pete responded. “You drop them here and we will redistribute. Larry, get a few buckets. We are going to have more sick

people.”

“Yes, sir.” The officer saluted.

“Wish me luck,” said Bartholomew.

“You don’t need it. You are a Reaper,” Pete replied, this time saluting the young man. “We’ll be ready.”

Bartholomew nodded and vanished.

His timing returning to the Beech Street parking lot was not the best. A fist flew past his face, only inches away. Bartholomew jumped to the side as Ruby’s leg intersected the incoming attacker.

“Sorry about that, Bart,” she said, kicking a few more guys out of the way. “You really should get a bell to warn people when you are coming back.”

“Or not land in the middle of a war zone.” Bartholomew jabbed another shifter, rushing Ruby from behind. “Kids are secured. Let’s move to the other side.”

“We can’t,” Ruby told him. “More shifters arrived, and they are going into a frenzy.” Ruby kicked a tall werewolf that was half transformed. “If we don’t contain this situation, they will all go berserk. All three churches are full of kids doing Trunk-O-Treat. It will be a bloodbath. We need to hold them until reinforcements get here.”

“We are not holding anything. They are too many,” Little J shouted, joining the pair. “I’m almost out of ammo.”

“Can’t you do your Reaper thing on them?” Ruby asked Bartholomew.

“Killing them is not something Death endorses,” Bartholomew explained.

“Can’t you do something less drastic?”

Bartholomew glanced at Ruby, and a wild idea crossed his mind. “I don’t know how this will work, but when I give the word, both of you get as low to the ground as possible.”

“What?” Little J asked from behind.

Bartholomew didn’t give himself too much time to think about his options. He pulled his scythe from his pocket and engaged the mechanism. As soon as the scythe was at its full range, he looked back at Ruby.

“Now!” Bartholomew shouted and Ruby tackled Little J to the ground, using her body to shield the human boy.

Bartholomew slammed his scythe to the ground, using the weapon as a guiding rod to expand his power. It wasn’t just his intent he let loose on the shifters, but a wave of magic that hit them like a bomb. Everyone in a

hundred-yard radius got hit with the blast. Windows exploded, alarms went off, floats tumbled over, and the sheer power of his magic knocked shifters out.

The only sound in the parking lot was that of the alarms blaring. Bartholomew collapsed to his knees, shaking.

“Bart!” Ruby rushed him, dazed but unharmed. “Please say something.”

“That,” he said softly, “is a onetime trick. I’m out of power.” Bartholomew leaned his head against Ruby, and she held him tight.

“I didn’t mean for you to kill yourself by taking everyone out,” Ruby chastised the Reaper. “Sometimes, you don’t have to be an overachiever.”

Bartholomew’s breathing was ragged. Ruby held him tight. Little J had a bloody nose, but otherwise was unharmed.

“Ruby, what was that?” Bob’s voice came across their Bluetooth gear.

“It felt like an earthquake,” Shorty added.

“Or a bomb,” Bob continued.

“All the above,” Ruby said softly, stroking Bartholomew’s hair. “Kamikaze Bart just took out over fifty shifters and two blocks of windows. We are safe for now, but he needs medical attention.”

“We will be there in three minutes,” Bob told her. “People are running wild now and we can’t get through.”

“Boss,” Triplet-3 jumped in. “We are just around the corner. We can grab Bart and take him to the Station. Will let the Doc know we are on the way.”

“Do that,” Bob agreed. “We will secure the area as soon as we arrive. Ruby, go with them.”

“Yes, Boss.” Ruby replied. “Now you don’t pass out on me,” she told Bartholomew. “We need you alive here.”

Bartholomew could barely keep his head up. It felt like his entire body had been squeezed dry and there was sandpaper in his veins. All he wanted to do was crawl into a bed and sleep for days.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



The sounds of laughter came from the open window. The streets in the downtown area were packed with civilians and Shifters alike. Nikita watched the crowd as she closed the window, cutting off the sounds. Her plans for the evening would need to change. That was always the case. She had work but some stranger tried to take advantage of her sister and Nikita had to step in. Her sister always came first. Nikita could take care of Will the next day. While Halloween would be the perfect day to spark the chaos, the day of the dead was a close second.

Nikita moved calmly around the bed towards the dresser in the small room. She hated the apartment in the Loft. It was one of the renovated old buildings downtown, with that quaint nostalgia feel. Her sister, on the other hand, loved the place and had packed every room, including the bedroom, with plants. The place looked more like a greenhouse than a home.

“Pathetic,” said Nikita, as she moved a plant out of the way to look in the mirror on the dresser. “Why do you still want to be an earth witch when you could do so much more?”

Glancing at her reflection, Nikita stroked the soft red curls of her natural hair. She loved the color a lot more than that blonde wig she always wore. But red made her stand out, and that was her sister’s color.

“I swear, you are seriously a magnet for evil shifters,” said Nikita softly.

A male voice came from the living room. Nikita picked up the tranquilizer gun from the small purse and smiled. Taking her time, she strolled out of the bedroom into the plant-filled living room.

“These plants are so impressive,” TJ said, facing the window filled with plants. “You have some I don’t even recognize. Would love to know where you got them from.”

TJ bent over to examine a few pots located further back than the rest.

“That would be a great, just not today.” Nikita told him in a sultry voice.

He spun around, and Nikita shot him in the chest with Abby’s gun. TJ’s eyes rolled back in his head as he dropped to the ground, comatose.

“Abby, dear,” said Nikita. “It’s for your own good. You know we can’t trust shifters.”



Bartholomew woke up in the infirmary at Union Station with an IV attached to his arm. He wasn’t the only one there. Other operatives took over half a dozen of the beds. Angela made her way around, checking on vitals and fluids.

“How do you feel, Bart?” said Angela, checking his pulse.

“Like a sun-dried tomato,” he replied.

“Drink this.” Angela handed him a glass of red bubbly fluids from the table next to him. “It will cool down your throat.”

Bartholomew didn’t protest, drinking the potion down.

“What were you thinking?” Angela asked, taking a seat next to him on the bed.

“That would be easier to eliminate the threat all at once,” he said hoarsely.

“Instead of just teleporting yourselves fifty feet in any direction,” she added.

“Hindsight is twenty-twenty doc.” Bartholomew dropped his head on the pillow. “What happened?”

“The short version. You drained your magical flow to almost nonexistent.”

Bartholomew raised his head to glanced at her. “I didn’t know that was a thing.”

“Bartholomew, you released as much power as a missile, yet you concentrated on a specific location and target.” Angela glared at him. “That skill and magic takes centuries to gain and then to master.”

“Not good, then?” he asked hoarsely.

“You know how your body only has so much blood?” she asked, and he nodded. “Well, think of your powers in the same way. Your body only has so much. When you used it all, it started pulling from your own life force.”

“I have never heard of that,” he said, holding his head with his hands.

“That’s because most beings don’t have as much power as you do to attempt something like that.” Angela adjusted his hair. “A stunt like that should have killed you. I don’t know how you survived.”

“Maybe because I already died once,” Bartholomew tried to joke, but failed.

“No, you can absolutely die again,” she reminded him. “But there is a lot we don’t know about Death’s powers. Regardless, you are one lucky guy. Don’t do it again.”

She slapped his hands as a reminder.

“Ouch.”

“Too late to complain,” said Angela. “Wait until your sister hears about this.”

“No!” Bartholomew shook his head. “She is going to kill me. Where is my phone?”

“On the table next to you,” Angela told him. “Now, don’t be getting yourself excited. It’s going to take you a few weeks for you to get back to normal. You can’t use your powers.”

“Thanks.” He reached over and took the phone.

His notices said he had over ten text messages. *Don’t they know I’m dying?* he asked himself but checked them anyway. The first one he clicked was from Eugene.

Hey man,

We found him, 2-bad Mickey was dead already.

Death is here as well.

Found ur killer- 1 of his clients.

Crazy-it’s a girl.

Guess she is an assassin on top of a serial-killer.

Can u be both?

But Isis said to send u this.

Bartholomew shook his head but regretted it as a wave of nausea hit him. Sometimes it took Eugene a while to get to the point, even in text. Eugene

sent an attachment, and it was taking longer than normal for the encrypted file to open.

"I need to upgrade the signal in the basement," Bartholomew told himself as he shook the phone hoping to speed up the process. He went to Eugene's next message while he waited.

According to Mickey, the girl's parents were killed by wolves.

She was rescued by a werewolf.

Isis said something about trauma and weird coping stuff

No idea, ur sis can explain later.

But chick is dangerous and doesn't know it.

Be careful.

"What in god's name are those two talking about?" Bartholomew looked around the room confused.

The phone beeped, and the photo finally downloaded. He switched to his files and the image of Abby came on the screen. Except that in this photo she had blonde hair instead of her red mane with blue eyes, as piercing as Magdalena, his dragon-shifter crush. The caption underneath read, *Nikita-shifter killer*.

"No!"

Bartholomew bolted from the bed, making everything hurt.

"What do you think you are doing?" Angela ran back to his bed. "What did I just tell you?"

Bartholomew handed her his phone. "Is TJ back?"

"Is this Abby?" Angela asked.

"I think so." Bartholomew struggled to move around the bed.

"I don't know, the features are sharper," Angela mumbled. "Maybe twins."

"Angie! Where is he?" Bartholomew waved a weak hand in front of her face.

"He and Abby never made it back."

"Call Bob. Tell him I'm heading to Abby's place." He took off the IV.

"Bartholomew, you can barely walk." Angela held him down.

"We don't have time. If Abby is the killer, TJ is in trouble." He placed a hand on her cheek and vanished.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



It had been years since teleporting had made Bartholomew vomit, but everything came out. He was leaning against the side of Abby's building. His head was spinning, he could barely hold himself up, but he needed to help. The crowds were thick, but nobody was looking behind. Instead, they were too focused on the street ahead and the parade route. Slowly, he pushed himself off the wall and made his way inside the building.

Every step hurt his soul, and he moved like he was a ninety-year-old man on his deathbed. Maybe coming alone was a bad idea, but it was too late to turn back. He reached the door to the apartment and, mercifully the door was unlocked. He stumbled in.

The normally cozy apartment was cold. Plants littered the place, and broken vases were all over the room. On the far wall, TJ was suspended from the ceiling, naked.

"God, please let him be alive." Bartholomew prayed, laboring to reach his friend.

"Please don't touch him," a smooth voice said from behind.

Bartholomew spun around and gasped. "Abby?"

"Sorry, dear. Abby is not here right now. The name is Nikita."

But it was Abby. Bartholomew was sure. Abby didn't have a twin that he knew of. He was the one who inputted all the personal files in their system. Abby was raised an only child. Yet there were slight differences in the face. Nikita's nose was a bit pointier. Abby's warm, brown eyes were gone and replaced with those icy-blue ones.

Bartholomew had read cases of multiple personalities. After Constantine had made him watch that crazy old flick *Sybil*, he was obsessed with making sure he never developed one. According to medical reports, it was possible for even their physical traits to vary when a personality took over.

But could it be this drastic? Bartholomew asked himself.

“Where is Abby?” Bartholomew asked, moving closer to TJ.

“Safe. Away from his lies and all the werewolves in this town.” Nikita played with a remote in her hand as she walked into the center of the room, blonde hair bouncing as she moved.

Even her movements were distinct. While Abby was the sweet girl next door, Nikita swayed as she walked. The moves of a predator.

“TJ is not a werewolf,” Bartholomew told her. “He is just a shifter.”

“Are you telling me that those claws are just for show, and he is not another big bad wolf?” Nikita spun around and pointed at the back wall. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll make sure Abby is safe no matter what. People like him are just going to break her heart again and leave her. Have you seen my toy?”

Bartholomew focused his sight on the other side of the room. Pointing directly at them was a large harpoon on a tripod.

“Abby wouldn’t want to hurt TJ. Please, whatever you are planning, stop,” Bartholomew begged, stalling for time as he searched his soul for any sign of power. Nothing. He was completely drained. “TJ is a great guy. He cares for Abby. He would never hurt her. None of us would.”

He barely had enough energy to hold himself up. *What were you planning to do once you got here in this condition?* Bartholomew chastised himself in silence.

“That’s what they all say.” Nikita skipped around the room to adjust her weapon. “I left my drinks at the other apartment. Now I’m having to improvise. Do you know our dear uncle gave this to Abby to help her get over her fear of wolves?”

“Please, you don’t have to do this.” Bartholomew moved away from TJ and towards the deranged Nikita.

“I recommend you stay exactly where you are,” she told him, pulling out the gun he had given Abby earlier. “You can stay awake to watch the show or you can go to sleep. The option is yours.”

Bartholomew moved in front of TJ covering the comatose man with his own body.

“Seriously?” Nikita laughed. “Can you even move, little Reaper?”

Bartholomew didn’t answer.

“Are you willing to die for that beast?” Nikita strolled slowly towards him but stopped a few feet away. “It would be a shame to kill...”

Nikita stopped in mid-sentence as her head snapped to the left, veins bulging on her neck. Her back went rigid, and her arms twitched in awkward angles. Bartholomew moved back to protect TJ from the woman as she jerked and spasmed as though trying to expel a demon. Nikita’s head dropped to her chest, and her eyes rolled to the back of her head.

Forcefully, she raised her head to face him. Bartholomew swallowed hard but didn’t move. Nikita blinked three times, and each time the blue of her irises shifted slightly until the soft brown of Abby’s eyes returned. “Abby, is that you?” Bartholomew whispered.

“Bartholomew, run,” Abby’s soft voice came out as a distant mutter. “I can’t hold her for long.”

“Abby.” Bartholomew couldn’t move.

“Get TJ out!” she cried, but Bartholomew could see she was losing the fight. One of her eyes had shifted back to blue.

“Abby, how can I help?” Bartholomew pleaded.

“Abby,” TJ moaned from the wall as he regained consciousness.

“She . . .” Abby’s head snapped back to the left.

“They lied,” Nikita told her. “Don’t trust them. You know what they will do. Steal your powers, hurt you, and leave. They always do. I’m the one wiping your tears and cleaning up the mess.”

Abby fought Nikita for control of her own body. Her arms flailing as if she was trying to hug herself. Her head snapped from side to side, and her breath was ragged.

“Bartholomew, get me down,” TJ told him.

Bartholomew shuffled back towards his friend, with barely enough energy to stay upright.

“Bart, are you okay?” TJ asked.

Bartholomew only nodded, using all his strength to untie TJ.

“They are . . . my friends . . .” Abby struggled to say, as she clawed at her own face with her free hand.

“It always starts the same.” Nikita fought for control, blood oozing from the small cuts on her face. “You are not strong enough to handle the pain.”

Tears mixed with Abby’s blood as she shook uncontrollably. “I’m not.”

“Let me make it better,” Nikita purred as she regained back the body.

“We must . . . stop,” Abby muttered.

Bartholomew glanced one more time at the struggling girl, as two distinct souls fought for dominance over one body. His fingers trembled as he finally managed to get the first strap off TJ’s wrist.

“I’m . . . sorry,” Abby whispered.

Thump.

“Nooo!” TJ screamed.

Bartholomew spun around, his hands dropping to his side, as he saw the harpoon protruding from Abby’s chest and she collapsed to the ground.

TJ shifted his free hand, and using his claw, destroyed the other side. He rushed to Abby’s side as her body collapsed on the floor.

“Abby, please stay with me,” TJ begged.

“Thank you for being a true friend,” Abby whispered, as her soul left her body.

Tears ran down Bartholomew’s cheeks as he saw two souls walking towards him. Abby was holding the small hand of Nikita, a younger youth with pigtails.

“Please don’t cry.” Abby wiped Bartholomew’s face. “You are supposed to be the strong one here.”

“It’s not fair,” Bartholomew whispered as he watched his friend fall to pieces.

“Life is not fair, but it is still beautiful,” she told him. “Would you let me say goodbye to him?”

“You are leaving me?” Nikita asked her, in a soft, scared voice.

“No, sweetie.” Abby bent down and hugged the little girl. “You have taken care of me for years. It’s my turn to take care of you. Just give me a minute to say goodbye to my friend.”

“I’m sorry, Abby.” Bartholomew cried harder. “I don’t have any power left so he can see you.”

Bartholomew’s heart broke as he couldn’t even give TJ this closure.

“But I do,” Death said, walking into the room. “Let me take it from here, Bartholomew.”

“Thank you,” said Abby to Death and made her way towards TJ. “Hey, it’s okay.”

Abby wrapped her arms around TJ and he sobbed into her.

“Please, don’t go,” he begged.

“You are the sweetest person who I have ever met,” she told him. “This part of me will always be grateful for meeting you. But I can’t leave her.” Abby turned towards Nikita, shivering in the corner. “I can’t pretend that part of me didn’t do those things. I wouldn’t know how to live with that guilt.”

“Abby,” TJ said.

“Shh.” Abby bent down and kissed his lips. “Promise me you are going to live. That you will see the world and be happy.”

“Abby.”

“Promise me you will see the world like you told me you wanted to, fall in love and be happy.”

“Abby.” TJ shook as he cried.

“I’m not scared anymore.” Abby smiled. “Finally, I had a family and was part of something great.”

Tears ran down her face as she hugged TJ one last time.

Death moved next to Bartholomew, who was holding onto Nikita’s hand.

“Let me take her. You are barely holding on,” Death told him.

“I’m fine,” he lied.

“You will be.” Death kissed his forehead, and the pressure on Bartholomew’s chest released enough for him to take in air properly.

Abby removed herself from TJ and walked back.

“Please keep an eye on him,” she told Bartholomew.

Bartholomew nodded.

Death stood next to Nikita, waiting. Abby moved next to Nikita and took her hand. The little girl pulled her down and whispered in her ear. Abby gasped.

“Bart, Will is alive. He is at the Arista Apartments, number 205.”

Death winked at her ward and vanished with Abby and Nikita.

Bartholomew shuffled next to his friend and kneeled. There were no words he could say to take the pain away. For the second time this week, he just held space. This time letting his friend cry his pain away.

Chapter Thirty



Bob entered the loft, head down. His movements were sluggish, and his eyes bloodshot from crying. It had been years since he lost a member of his team. While he worked for Death and had experience dealing with the recently departed, he didn't have experience with grief.

Isis and Constantine sat at the kitchen table, each with large mugs of coffee in front of them. Bob joined them, taking a seat across from Isis.

"How is the team?" Constantine asked Bob.

"Hurting."

"Katrina has grief counselors on staff that she can loan us," Isis told him.

"We are going to need them," Bob confessed. "We have canceled court for the next week, and only a skeleton crew will be on duty. Everyone loved Abby, and this was a blow."

They sat in silence for a few more minutes.

Bob rubbed his face and exhaled deeply. "I didn't suspect a thing."

"Nobody did," answered Constantine. "It has been decades since I've seen a case that serious with multiple personalities. Two souls were living in that body."

"Is Abby's soul in hell?" Bob poked at the table, holding back more tears.

"Death pulled some strings," Isis informed him.

"Really?" Bartholomew asked, walking into the kitchen area from the back.

Isis nodded. "Abby refused to let Nikita suffer alone. Death couldn't tolerate having an innocent soul condemned to damnation."

“But Nikita?” Bartholomew asked. “She was a serial killer.”

“A serial killer, an assassin, a broken child,” Isis replied. “She was many things. But also, a part of a really good person. I don’t know how Abby separated her soul in two, but they are two distinct beings.”

“What did Death do?” Bob asked, leaning forward.

“She got permission to deliver them to purgatory,” Isis replied.

“But Abby wasn’t Catholic,” said Bartholomew.

“No. But Death makes deliveries there,” Constantine jumped in. “It’s a suitable compromise for both. Nikita will have centuries to heal from the trauma and atone for her sins. Abby can keep her company. They will both be safe now.”

“TJ would like to know this,” Bartholomew told them.

“We can also thank Abby for giving us Will’s location,” Constantine added softly. “At least that stopped the escalation of that stupid war.”

“That’s at least one blessing,” said Bob.

Isis rose from her chair and walked over to her brother. His silver eyes were also puffy. Bartholomew’s usual smile was gone. Isis embraced her brother, who held her tight.

“I’m sorry,” Bartholomew whispered. “I’m going to miss your birthday tomorrow.”

Pulling away, Isis looked into Bartholomew’s face. “Where are you going?”

“TJ and I are heading to Europe,” he told her.

“Bart, you are extremely weak,” Isis protested. “Death gave you enough energy to heal your body. After your last jump, you won’t have any power for at least a month.”

“Relax.” He rubbed her chin with his thumb. “We are going backpacking the old-fashioned way. No powers. We even got plane tickets to travel coach.”

“I like the initiative, but maybe you two are taking it too far,” Constantine explained. “How about we drop you off in the jet and pick you up when you are done?”

“But we are trying to embrace life, like Abby wanted us to,” Bartholomew protested.

“Honey, I love it.” Isis gripped him. “But Constantine is right. You are still a Reaper. We still have enemies. Roaming around human airports

packed with people and supernatural beings without your powers is not the best plan.”

“Are you saying we can’t go?”

“You can absolutely go,” said Constantine. “Just not alone on a commercial plane. Bob, pack your bags. You are going with the boys.”

“What? Me?”

“You need a vacation,” Constantine explained. “Hiking through Europe will do you wonders.”

“Are you coming?” Bob glanced at Constantine.

“Hell no,” said Constantine. “I’ll be right here watching over Haven.”

“Isis?” Bartholomew asked.

“No, sweetie.” She smiled warmly. “You all need this. I’ll be here keeping an eye on that one, so he doesn’t burn down the town. But I will escort you to Europe. We can have my birthday lunch in Italy, and then I’ll be back. How does that sound?”

Bartholomew kissed her cheek again and held her tight. After a long embrace, Isis pulled away. She ruffled Bartholomew’s hair.

“Bob, go pack,” Isis repeated. “See if Shorty wants to join you. I’ll get the pilot ready.”

“Of course, he will come,” Bob informed them. “A trip to Europe. Who wouldn’t? Let me get ready.”

Bob marched towards the door of the loft and stopped at the threshold. His heart was broken over the passing of Abby. But as he watched his family, a very unconventional family, he knew he would see her again. He was Death’s intern, after all. For them, death was only another destination. Bob rushed out the door to get ready for a very needed break from the madness of Haven.



Hope you enjoyed Cursed by Fur and the fabulous Reapers Universe. This group has stolen my heart and it’s always such a blast to dive back into their lives. If you are curious of how the lovely Isis and the cheerful Bartholomew became Reapers, you can start the journey with [Death’s Intern](#). This is book 1 in the Intern Diaries series and the first book in the

Reapers Universe. Go back in time and see how this strange group of misfits became a family and change Texarkana forever.

If you are still reading this, I have a little surprise for you. This is the first time I have ever done this, but I'm so excited it. I have included a bonus chapter. This is from the perspective of Isis. You get an inside look at what happened on that mission between Isis and Eugene searching for Mickey. Happy Reading!

Chapter Thirty-One

Bonus Chapter

Halloween Day

Isis and Eugene appeared in front of a dark townhouse on a deserted street in the lower eastside in Manhattan. The streetlights had been blown out. The temperature was cooler on this side of the country. Isis wasn't sure if it was magic or just being up north again, but the chill of the night crawled up her spine.

"Okay, that's the house," Eugene whispered.

"Are you sure this time?" Isis asked scanning her surroundings. "This is the fourth location we have checked in the last hour."

"Listen, it's not like illegal chemists register their labs with the IRS," Eugene said, making his way to the basement entrance of the house. "Trust me, I have to check."

Isis followed, tossing her long braid behind her.

"Yes, this is it," Eugene announced. "Can you feel it?"

Looking around the dirty entry way, Isis shook her head. "Feel what?"

"Are you serious? You can't feel the magic of the alchemist? Don't you have Death's power?"

"Eugene, can you feel the heartbeats of every person in this city? Can you feel every soul that has died but refuses to move on as they wander the city? Because if you can't, let's not discuss what our powers can and can't do."

"Ouch," Eugene said, moving away from her. "Someone is salty today."

"I'm going to need you to focus." Isis turned the scientist around to face the entrance. "We are running out of time."

“Fine.”

Eugene moved closer to the doorway, running his hands over the bricks without touching them. He closed his eyes and moved trancelike around the entrance. A few paces later, he stopped and snapped his eyes open.

“I knew it.” Eugene pointed at a small snake carved in one brick. “This is it and it’s still active. We are on the right track.”

Eugene moved back to the door and knocked. Isis scanned the streets, but nothing moved. She moved closer to Eugene and froze.

“Can you feel that?”

“Are you making fun of me now?”

“Eugene, I’m serious.” She pressed her palm on the door. “Death is here.”

“When you mean death, are you talking about your boss or someone dead, or that death is coming? Which one is it?”

“All the above.” She paced around, trying to see through the dirty windows. “We need to get inside.”

“What? We are not breaking and entering.” Eugene folded his arms over his chest. “I will not go to jail in New York City for something like that. That would ruin my credibility with the Smithsonian society.”

Isis stared at her friend, and without breaking eye contact, slammed her hand against the front door. “Oh look, it’s open.”

“Isis, what have you done?”

Eugene snapped his head in all directions. Isis grabbed him by the arms and pulled him inside. Eugene struggled to walk as he searched his pockets. The inside of the town hall was musty and dark.

“What are you doing?” Isis asked once inside.

“I’m not leaving fingerprints in this place.” He snapped a pair of gloves on, and Isis shook her head.

“This place is creepy,” she hissed.

“Don’t tell me you can see in the dark as well.”

“You didn’t get that either,” Isis mocked him, and pulled on the light switch from the middle of the room.

Eugene shoved the door closed before the light could escape. The walls of the small room were covered in shelves. The shelves had rows of jars, each filled with different concoctions. From frog legs to golden leaves, the place was out of a fairy tale or a horror movie depending on your taste.

“What’s wrong with it?” Eugene asked, inspecting a couple of jars that had appeared to be hooves inside.

“Your lab doesn’t look like this,” Isis said.

“Not the public one, but you do not know what my secret room is like.” Eugene wiggled his eyebrows, shaking the jars in front of him.

“When this is done, we are having a long chat about your need for a life.” Isis frowned and moved further inside. “This way.”

“Where are you going? There is nothing here.”

“To the backroom.” Isis pushed past a couple of large boxes.

“How do you know that?” Eugene didn’t wait for an answer and chased behind the Reaper.

The boxes blocked the view of the small hallway in the back. To the left, a set of stairs led up. Directly in front stood a black door, ajar. Isis moved through, never bothering to knock.

“I was starting to wonder if you would make it on time,” said Death, sitting at the edge of a large desk covered with papers and the dead body of Mickey.

Isis turned on the lights and smiled. “Eugene was rusty with directions.”

“Who are you talking to?” Eugene asked. “Oh God, dead body.” He rushed over to check the face. “We are definitely too late. This was Mickey.”

“Thank you for waiting,” said Isis, making Eugene spin around in circles.

“Are you messing with me? Who else is here? I know you can see and talk to ghosts.” Eugene raised his fists, ready to protect himself.

Death snapped her fingers, making herself visible to Eugene, as well as the soul of the recently departed.

“Jesus!” screamed Eugene. “A little warning would have been nice.”

“I told you Death was here.”

“We really need to work on our communication,” Eugene replied, but stopped when he noticed the soul of Mickey waving his hands through a large lever. “Is that normal for a ghost?”

“Not at all,” Isis replied, looking back at Death.

“He has been doing that since I got here,” Death explained, hopping off the desk. Her dark suit still wrinkle-free. “Refuses to move until he pulls the lever.”

“That’s weird,” Eugene muttered.

“Go talk to him.” Isis pushed Eugene forward.

“Me? You are the Reaper.”

“Yes, but you knew him. Go!” Isis gave him another shove.

Eugene adjusted his lab coat and moved closer to the man. “Hey, Mickey, how are you?”

“Umm.” The ghost turned cautiously around. “You!” The ghost rushed at Eugene but moved straight through. “You did this to me.”

“Me? No way!” Eugene backed away from the ghost.

“What did I do to your mistress this time that she had me killed? You came to claim my head as proof, right?”

“Boy, please!” Isis interrupted him. “If Pestilence wanted you dead, she would have done it herself. Trust me, she is that hateful.”

“I agree with Isis. Pestilence would never have sent others to do her work when it comes to punishments.” Death moved around the desk to inspect the body. “Besides, she would never use guns when she has so many other options.”

“If you are not responsible, why are you here?” the ghost of Mickey demanded.

“We need some answers,” Eugene said, moving away from the ghost.

“What kind of answers?” The ghost moved closer to him.

“Back off, buddy.” Isis moved in front of the ghost. “If you are thinking of possessing him, it won’t end well for you.”

The ghost froze as Isis's silver eyes glowed in the dim light.

“You can’t blame a guy for trying.” He went back to the corner to fight with the lever. “But I’m busy here, so I can’t help you.”

“We found a rare toxin, laced with the Black Mamba venom on a dead shifter in Haven,” Eugene stated. “I think it might be one of yours.”

The ghost stopped and turned around. “You found traces of the Mambas’ venom? Impossible.”

“It was well hidden,” Eugene admitted. “That combination of toxin replicated a heart attack flawlessly. If it wasn’t for Fifth’s obsession with venoms, we wouldn’t have noticed it.”

“One of my best creations,” the ghost bragged.

“But why would you want to have three kids killed?” Isis asked, also inspecting the body with Death.

“Those bodies were not our concern,” the ghost stated.

“Then what was your concern?” Eugene resumed the questions.

“Haven, or the destruction of Haven.”

Death vanished and reappeared next to the ghost, hand wrapped tightly around his throat. “Why would you ever mess with my domain?” The

temperature in the room dropped as Death spoke.

The ghost gasped, and colors drained slowly from its shape.

“Death, stop.” Isis rushed to their side. “We need answers.”

Death released the ghost and moved back to the corpse.

“I really don’t recommend pissing off the one who would take you to the next life.” Isis pointed back at Death.

“It wasn’t personal,” the ghost mumbled. “But Haven is just bad for business.”

“How?” Isis and Eugene asked in unison.

“Many people have made fortunes in the protection business, including myself.” The ghost focused back on pulling the lever. “With Haven, many of those people we protected found new homes. We are losing income and even our workforce.”

“So, you pay to have shifters killed in Haven?” Isis continued.

“Not exactly.” The ghost smiled from the corner. “Let’s just say all the stars lined up in our favor. An assassin with a hatred for werewolves just happened to move to Haven, where one of the older clans has made their home. We just maximized our resources.”

“Who?” Isis asked.

“Lady, I have clients to protect.”

“Clients?” Eugene looked at the corpse. “Somebody shot you. How do you know it wasn’t one of your clients?”

“Maybe,” the ghost replied. “But it would be bad for business if people knew I was spilling the beans on them.”

“You realize you are dead, right?” Isis also pointed to the corpse.

“Kids, death is only a status.” The ghost pointed at himself. “I have an arrangement with a certain devil that would secure my next existence. I can’t be jeopardizing my future for the likes of you all.”

“Unless you help them, you will never make it to your next destination, and you will wander the streets of New York City for all eternity,” Death informed him.

“You wouldn’t!” the ghost shouted.

“All Havens are under my jurisdiction,” Death informed him. “Why shouldn’t I enforce my punishment for those who target my people?”

“But, but, you deliver souls,” the ghost mumbled.

“I’m Death. I will do what I please.”

Mickey shook against the corner, struggling to make his mouth work. "The information is on my computer." He pointed at a laptop underneath his corpse.

Eugene ran across the office and cautiously moved the body out of the way to pull the laptop out. "What's your password?"

"It's biometrics," Mickey informed him.

Isis picked up the corpse's hand and dropped it next to the laptop. Eugene jumped slightly but went to work starting the computer. The ghost floated near Eugene, but Isis held him back from touching him.

"You should find a file labeled Nikita," the ghost informed him.

"Really?" Isis asked.

"The girl thought she was all so clever, but with enough money and people, you can find anything."

"Who is she and why does she hate shifters so much?" Isis sat on the desk.

"The norm." The ghost moved back to the corner. "Some childhood trauma with wolves."

"Was she?" Eugene asked from behind the computer. "You know, assaulted by werewolves?"

"Not according to our records," said the ghost. "Something more mundane. It seems wolves attacked her family. Now she hates them all."

"How is that mundane?" Isis asked, glaring at the ghost.

"They weren't even shifters, just regular-ass wolves." He leaned his head against the lever. "Who knows what would make a person snap?"

"I don't know," said Eugene. "Seeing your family devoured by wolves would do it to you."

"It was their fault," the ghost replied. "Why would you raise wild beasts and think they wouldn't come back against you? Anyway, would one of you be so kind to pull this lever for me?"

"Why?" asked Isis.

"Like I said, I have many clients with many secrets," the ghost told her. "I would like to make sure they are protected while I'm gone."

"What does the lever do?" Eugene asked from the laptop.

"Set the building on fire."

Isis and Eugene both snapped their heads towards the ghost.

"Have you lost your mind?" Isis shouted. "A fire here would take out half of the lower eastside."

“Relax, Reaper.” The ghost waved his hands. “There is a control spell on the building. The fire will only burn this building and will stay contained until it’s extinguished.”

“Is that even possible?” Isis asked.

“It is,” Death responded. “Also, not a bad idea.”

“Really?” Eugene asked, looking up from the computer.

“There are things in this shop that should remain locked up.”

“Great, so let’s do it,” the Ghost said cheerfully.

“Got it!” Eugene exclaimed from the computer. “That’s a shame. She is a pretty looking girl to be a serial killer.”

“What?” Isis asked, walking around the desk.

“He has a picture of her.” Eugene turned the computer around for Isis to look at the photo.

“Jesus Christ.” Isis froze.

“Interesting,” said Death.

“Eugene, take a picture of that and sent it to Bob and Bartholomew now.” Isis moved to the edge of the room where the ghost was standing. “Hope you realize that deals with the Devil never end good for people.”

“Done,” said Eugene.

Isis pulled the lever and rushed back to Eugene. The sound of busting pipes filled the small room.

“Eugene, time to go.”

“With pleasure.”

“Death.” Isis nodded at her boss and taking hold of Eugene, they vanished.



A Note from the Author



Dear Reader,

Let me just start by saying THANK YOU to YOU for picking up this book and going on this journey with one of my favorite families- the Reapers Crew. During the trials of my author career, bringing joy to others is the reason I have kept on writing. I truly hope you enjoyed the adventures, the quirky characters, and the nonstop shenanigans of the gang.

If you are new to my universe, welcome to the Reapers Family. For those of you who have been following the journey, have cheered on the crew, and believe in this dream- I hope this baby made you proud. Picking up the story five years after Judgment Day was a fun challenge and truly a new process for me. Thank you for believing in me.

With that in mind, with every book, I'm always reminded that it takes a village to bring these manuscripts to life. Let me start by thanking the amazing Ms. Jaime Dalton for inviting me to be a part of this series and letting me put my little twist on a fun retelling. It has been an absolute pleasure working with each of the authors in this collection. Thank you so much to the talented Saint Jupiter for the gorgeous cover.

Thank you to the amazing Ms. Kayla Wilkinson for a fabulous job as my developmental editor. Sometimes translating all the things in my head to the page is tough. Lots of love for the talented Michelle Hoffman for comments and feedback. A huge THANK YOU to my fabulous beta readers, Mr. Patton Tidwell and Mr. CF Coleman. They had no issues letting me know when my twists made little sense.

On a personal note, if you enjoy the story, please consider leaving a rating and possibly a brief review. Your reviews help others find the books you love. If you would like to stay in touch, join my newsletter for updates and even Monday Motivations from me. Stay fabulous my dear friend!

With love, D. C.!



About Author



D. C. Gomez, is a fast-talking extra-quirky Dominican with a dark sense of humor.

She used to enjoy long walks at the park and all that fun outdoors activities; unfortunately, due to a mysterious condition she is now allergic to the sun.

Rumor has it, that her true nature is coming out and her vampirism is now showing. If you would like to learn more about her, or join her at an event, check out her website at [dcmomez-author.com](http://dcgomez-author.com). We promise she doesn't bite (much...).



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